American Girl®

Maryellen

1954

The One and Only

For Ellie

About the Author

VALERIE TRIPP says that she became a writer because of the kind of person she is. She says she's curious, and writing requires you to be interested in everything. Talking is her favorite sport, and writing is a way of talking on paper. She's a daydreamer, which helps her come up with her ideas. And she loves words. She even loves the struggle to come up with just the right words as she writes and rewrites. Ms. Tripp lives in Maryland with her husband.

Maryellen

1954

The One and Only

by Valerie Tripp

American Girl®

Maryellen's Scrapbook

My teacher

My school picture

I like school, even though I'm not so good at cursive!

The beach is just a short walk from my house.

My house looks just like the others in our neighborhood—except for the door!

Maryellen's Family & Friends

My parents

Joan, 17, and her boyfriend, Jerry

Carolyn is 14, Beverly is 6

Tom is 4 and Mikey is almost 2

Davy lives next door. The boy with the beanie is Wayne the Pain!

The Karens and Angela

TABLE of CONTENTS

1 The Room Switcheroo..... 1

2 The All-Girls Room..... 12

3 Extraordinary, Not Extra Ordinary... 23

4 Taking Responsibility..... 34

5 The Poodle Skirt..... 45

6 Tickled Pink..... 55

7 Hand-Me-Down Teacher..... 66

8 The Lunch Bunch..... 77

9 Maryellen's Cold War..... 88

10 The One and Only Maryellen..... 94

Inside Maryellen's World..... 106

Beautiful
FLORIDA
A Peek into
Maryellen's
World

Roller Skating
ROLLER RINK
VARSITY

Maryellen
HERO of the
WILD WEST
TV
GUIDE

The Room Switcheroo

Chapt 1

aryellen Larkin liked to make up episodes of her favorite TV shows and imagine herself in them. This morning, for example, Maryellen was walking down the hot, sunny sidewalk with her dog, Scooter. Really, she was mailing a letter to her grandparents. But she was *pretending* that she was in an episode of the exciting Western *The Lone Ranger*. Her only companion was her trusty horse, Thunderbolt. (That was Scooter's part.) Maryellen leaned forward as if she were battling her way through a blinding blizzard. If she didn't deliver the medicine she was carrying, hundreds of people would die.

Maryellen never gave herself superpowers in any of her imagined shows. She didn't fly or do magic. The difference was that in her TV shows, everyone listened to her great ideas. They followed her advice, and—*ta-da!*—everything turned out just right.

Maryellen put her letter in the mailbox, imagining that she was handing medicine to a kindly old doctor in a snowy town in the Old West.

"Thank you, Miss Larkin, ma'am," the imaginary

doctor said. "We desperately needed this medicine. You have saved hundreds of lives today."

Maryellen smiled modestly and shrugged as if to say, "It was nothing." Then she turned to go. "Come on, Thunderbolt," she said to Scooter. "Our work is done."

Scooter, a stout dachshund, had *just* flopped down and made himself comfortable in the shade of the mailbox. Maryellen whispered, "Come on, Scooter. Get up, old boy." So Scooter rose with a good-natured sigh and waddled behind Maryellen, who pretended to trudge through drifts of snow while grateful townspeople called after her, "Thank you, Miss Larkin! You're our hero!"

"Hey, Ellie," said a real voice, calling her by her nickname. The voice belonged to her friend Davy Fenstermacher, who lived next door in a house that looked exactly like the Larkins' house. Maryellen and Davy had been friends forever.

"Howdy, pardner," Maryellen drawled.

"I'll race you to the swing!" said Davy. "On your mark, get set, *go*!"

Maryellen and Davy ran to the Larkins' backyard, with Scooter loping along behind them. Maryellen got to the swing first, jumped on, and began to pump. "I win!" she called down to Davy. "You be the Lone Ranger, stuck in quicksand, and I'll jump down and rescue you."

"Okay," said Davy agreeably. Of course, they both knew that cowboys didn't usually jump off swings. But the tree swing in Maryellen's backyard was so much fun that they used it in lots of the TV shows they made up.

Maryellen swung high and then jumped off, landing on the grass with a soft thud. "Come on, Thunderbolt!" she called to Scooter. "We've got to save the Lone Ranger!"

Scooter, already asleep in the shade, snored.

"Better wake him up first, Ellie," said Davy.

But before Maryellen could rouse Scooter, her six-year-old sister, Beverly, came clomping out of the house in an old pair of Mrs. Larkin's high heels. Beverly wore one of Dad's baseball caps turned inside out so that it looked like a crown. Right behind Beverly came Tom and Mikey, Maryellen's younger brothers. They were four and not-quite-two years old.

"What are you doing?" Beverly asked.

"Nothing," said Maryellen, wishing that Beverly and the boys would go back inside, but knowing that they wouldn't. Maryellen, Beverly, Tom, and Mikey shared a bedroom, and even though the little kids were cute and sweet and goofy, they drove Maryellen crazy. Now that it was summer, Beverly, Tom, and Mikey stuck to her like glue.

They couldn't bear to be left out of anything fun that Maryellen might be doing.

Sure enough, Beverly said, "I want to play with you and Davy!"

"Me too!" said Tom.

"Me!" said Mikey.

Davy shot Maryellen a sympathetic look. He had years of experience dealing with Beverly, Tom, and Mikey.

Thinking quickly, Maryellen suggested to Davy, "What if the little kids are in the quicksand, too, and I rescue all of you?"

"Good idea," said Davy.

"Pretend I'm a queen that you're rescuing," said Beverly.

"Oh, brother," Maryellen muttered. That was another problem with Beverly. She liked to pretend, but she always pretended the same thing: that she was a queen. Dad called her Queen Beverly. "I don't think they had queens in the Wild West," Maryellen said. "I've never seen one on a TV show, anyway. Have you, Davy?"

"Nope," said Davy firmly.

Maryellen smiled. Good old Davy always backed her up.

Queen Beverly looked stubborn. Maryellen was just about to give in to Her Majesty when their mother called

out the back door, "Ellie, honey, come in for a minute. I need you."

"Okay," called Maryellen, feeling pleased. Mom needed *her*!

Maryellen's pride wilted just a bit when Mom added, "Beverly, Tom, and Mikey, you come, too." She wished Mom wouldn't always lump her together with Beverly, Tom, and Mikey as if they were one big bumpy creature with four heads, eight arms, and eight legs. Mom certainly treated Maryellen's older sisters, Joan and Carolyn, as separate, serious people.

I'm tired of being one of the "little kids," grumped Maryellen to herself, for the millionth time. *I guess I'm stuck with Beverly, but I'm much too grown-up to share a room with Tom and Mikey. Somehow, I have to convince Mom that I should share a bedroom with Joan and Carolyn so that she'll think of me as one of the "big girls" and take me—and my ideas—more seriously.*

"What do you need us for, Mom?" asked Maryellen.

"Just a quick family meeting," said Mom.

"Oh," said Maryellen without enthusiasm. She knew from experience that it was hard to get a word in edgewise during family meetings. They were not at all like one of her pretend TV shows where she was the hero and everyone hung on her every word. Maryellen sighed and

said to Davy, "See you later, alligator."

"In a while, crocodile," said Davy. "I'll wait here."

Maryellen walked into the kitchen and slid onto the bench in the breakfast nook next to Joan, her eldest sister. Joan, who was seventeen and therefore nearly all grown-up, looked sideways at Maryellen's grass-stained shorts and inched away, closer to Carolyn. It was crowded on the bench, but Maryellen wanted Mom to see her next to Joan and Carolyn, on their side of the table, so that Mom would think of the three of them as a group.

Maryellen could tell that this family meeting would be like all the others: frustrating. The kitchen was already noisy. Dad had left on a three-day business trip earlier that morning, but Mom and Carolyn, Maryellen's next-oldest sister, were talking a mile a minute. Tom was wailing like a siren as he rode his toy fire truck around the kitchen. Mikey was banging a spoon on the tray connected to his high chair. Mrs. Larkin took Mikey's spoon away from him and gave him a piece of toast, which was quieter to bang, and then said, "Kids!"

Everyone quieted down.

"I have an important announcement," said Mrs. Larkin. "My friends Betty and Florence are coming to spend the night."

"Who're Fletty and Borence?" asked Beverly.

"***B***etty and ***Fl***orence," said Mrs. Larkin. "You kids have never met them. We worked together at the factory. They live in New York City now. We're going to a reunion luncheon at the factory tomorrow."

Maryellen knew that Mom was referring to the aircraft factory where she had worked during World War Two. Her mind sped ahead. Lots of TV quiz shows were filmed in New York City. Maybe Mom's friends could get her a spot on one of them! She'd be the youngest contestant *ever*—

Joan interrupted Maryellen's daydream with a practical question. "Where will Betty and Florence sleep?"

Maryellen's mind sped ahead again. This could be the moment she had been waiting for! "I have an idea," she announced.

But Mom didn't hear Maryellen. No one did. Mom was saying, "I guess they'll have to sleep on the sofa bed in the living room, though that doesn't seem very welcoming."

"I've got an idea," Maryellen said again. She tugged on her mother's sleeve. "Listen!"

But Mrs. Larkin just patted Maryellen's hand and gave her a wink and a smile while everyone else kept

talking as much and as loudly as ever.

Maryellen grabbed Mikey's spoon and pounded it on the table the way she'd seen judges pound gavels in TV courtroom drama shows. "HEY!" she shouted. "Order in the court!"

Mom winced and held her hands over her ears. "Ellie, sweetie pie, settle down," she scolded gently. "Please don't shout and bang the table like Mikey. It's childish."

"Sorry, Mom," said Maryellen, red in the face. The last thing she wanted was for Mom to think that she was childish. "But listen—I have a great idea!"

"Tell us," said Mom. "You have our attention."

"I think Mom's guests should sleep in Joan and Carolyn's room."

"*My* room?" said Joan. "That's impossible! Carolyn and I hardly fit in there together as it is."

"We're squooshed!" Carolyn agreed. She and Joan shared a set of bunk beds in a tiny bedroom.

"I have it all figured out," said Maryellen. "Joan, you and Carolyn will give your room to Betty and Florence. You'll sleep in the big bedroom with Beverly and me, in Tom and Mikey's bunk beds, and the boys will sleep in Mom and Dad's room." Maryellen smiled at Tom. "You *like* sleeping on the floor, don't you?"

"Yes!" said Tom. He looked happy. But then, Tom just

about always looked happy. With spiky yellow hair sticking straight out all over his head, he looked like a cheerful dandelion.

Joan frowned. She started to say, "I don't—"

But Mom interrupted, "Why, Maryellen Larkin! I do believe you've hit upon a solution to our problem."

Maryellen beamed, although she wished that Mom hadn't sounded quite so surprised that she had had a good idea. Flushed with her success, she rattled on eagerly. "After Betty and Florence leave," she said, "Tom and Mikey can move into the little room, and the big room will be the All-Girls Room." Maryellen was sure that sharing a room with Joan and Carolyn would change everything for her, and change the way everyone thought of her and treated her, too. They'd see that she was mature. After all, she was nearly ten. She was going to be in the fourth grade!

"But—but," Joan sputtered, "that means *four* of us will share *one* closet and—"

"Whoa!" said Mrs. Larkin, holding up both hands. "Hold it, everyone." She turned to Maryellen and said, "Ellie, dear, you're getting carried away, as usual. We'll give Betty and Florence the little room tonight. But let's do one thing at a time, okay?"

"Sure, Mom," said Maryellen.

"All right then," said Mrs. Larkin. "Meeting adjourned."

Mom lifted Mikey out of his high chair, and he toddled behind Beverly and Tom to go watch cartoons on TV. But as Maryellen, Carolyn, and Mom started to leave, Joan stopped them.

"Just for the record," said Joan, "I'm not crazy about this whole room switcheroo."

"Why not?" asked Maryellen.

"Well," said Joan. "For starters, you're sloppy."

Maryellen could see that her sweaty hair and grimy hands were a sharp contrast to Joan's crisp, clean appearance. "Well, maybe I'm a little messy right *now*," she said honestly. She smoothed her rumpled T-shirt, which was a faded and stained hand-me-down from Carolyn. "I was playing outdoors."

"I know," said Joan. "You were goofing around with Davy like a wild tomboy, as usual. *That'll* have to stop soon anyway, because you can't be friends with a boy in fourth grade."

Maryellen frowned. "Why not?"

"It just doesn't work. You wait and see," Joan went on. "But it's not only your appearance that's grubby. Your bed, your drawers, your closet—*all* your things are messy. Last night, you flooded the bathroom, and before that,

you stepped in the popcorn bowl and overturned it. Face it, Ellie—you create a disaster area wherever you go."

"Hey!" said Carolyn, sticking up for Maryellen. "Just because Ellie's not persnickety like you doesn't mean she's a hopeless mess."

"Right!" said Maryellen indignantly. "And I don't create disasters. Do I, Mom?"

"Well," said Mrs. Larkin, "I think what Joan means is that you're not very tidy or organized, honey."

"See?" said Joan. "I don't think it's fair that I should have to share a room with such a messy little kid."

"A messy little kid?" Maryellen repeated, horrified. Granted, she was not a finicky fussbudget like Joan. But a *messy little kid*? One who was childish, wild, untidy, tomboyish, disorganized, and grubby? A messy little kid who created disasters wherever she went? Was that how Joan and—Maryellen gulped—*Mom* thought of her?

The All-Girls Room

Chapt 2

et's say this," said Mrs. Larkin. "We'll give the All-Girls Room a try tonight. Sharing a room with your big sisters will be a test for you, Ellie. If you show that you can be tidy and responsible, we'll consider making the All-Girls Room permanent. Do we have a deal, ladies?"

"I suppose so," said Joan with a shrug.

"It's fine with me," said Carolyn.

"Yes," said Maryellen. She understood that if she failed this test, she'd lose her chance for the All-Girls Room. But there was something even more important than that at stake. If she failed the test, she'd lose her chance to improve Mom's opinion of her.

"That's settled, then," said Mom. "Joan and Carolyn, come with me and I'll give you fresh bedsheets. And you'd better move your pajamas and whatever else you'll need for tonight into Ellie's room. Ellie, if I were you, I'd start a Cleanup Campaign right away."

"I will, Mom," said Maryellen.

While the others headed to the linen closet, Maryellen

dashed outside to speak to Davy. "Looks like I'll be inside for a while," she said. "I've got to clean up my room."

"How come?" asked Davy. He was sitting on the swing, spinning to make himself dizzy.

Maryellen explained about the room switcheroo. "Joan didn't want to do it, because she thinks I'm messy. Mom said that she had to, but that it'll be a test for me."

"A test of what?" asked Davy.

"Neatness, mostly," Maryellen said, "and being careful of what I do."

Davy grinned. "Or what you *don't* do," he said. "Just *don't* make a mess."

"Right!" said Maryellen, cheered up by Davy as always. "That'll be easy!"

* * *

Usually, when Mom asked Maryellen to clean up her room, she gave it a lick and a wish, shoving her clothes into drawers, tossing her shoes into the closet, and yanking the bed covers up. But now, Maryellen folded her clothes neatly, lined up her shoes in the closet, and pulled her covers taut so that not one lump or wrinkle could be seen. Then she dusted the top of the bureau in case Joan and Carolyn wanted to put their brushes and combs there.

"Look, Mom," she said. "*Ta-da!* I made everything tidy and beautiful."

Mrs. Larkin gave Maryellen's work a quick glance. "Good," she said as she tucked a sheet under the mattress of the upper bunk.

Mom didn't seem overly impressed by her efforts, so Maryellen looked around to see what else she could do. She collected Tom's trucks and Mikey's blocks in a box and slid the box under the bed just as Joan and Carolyn appeared, their arms full. Maryellen was delighted to see that in addition to her pajamas, Joan was bringing her tennis dress, bobby pins, cold cream, and several books and magazines. Carolyn was bringing some clothes, some rock 'n' roll records, and her portable record player.

Now that's more like it! thought Maryellen. *Instead of babyish toy trucks and blocks, the All-Girls Room will be full of grown-up things like books, rock 'n' roll records, and movie-star magazines.*

"You need all that for *one night*?" asked Mom, shaking her head at Joan and Carolyn.

"Not all of it is for me," said Carolyn. "I thought while I was at it, I might as well move these dresses I've outgrown into Ellie's closet." Carolyn showed Maryellen a plaid dress. "I wore this dress to the first day of fourth grade," she said, "so I thought you'd like to, too." Carolyn hung the dress in the closet, and then scrambled up onto the top bunk.

"Uh, thanks," said Maryellen, polite but not thrilled.

"Hey," said Joan, "I remember that dress. I wore it in fourth grade, too. I used to think it was so cute."

After Joan and Carolyn left, Maryellen held the plaid dress up in front of herself as she looked in the mirror. She sighed. "Mom," she said, "don't you think this hand-me-down dress is sort of old and worn-out? I sure would love a brand-new outfit to wear for the first day of fourth grade." Maryellen imagined herself in a chic, fashionable outfit like the ones girls wore on TV shows. The perfect back-to-school dress would guarantee the perfect start

to school and a perfect year in fourth grade! She said eagerly, "Mom, you and I should go shopping and—"

"Maryellen!" Mrs. Larkin interrupted in a no-nonsense voice. "Carolyn's plaid dress is perfectly fine for your first day of school. You don't need anything new, except maybe some socks and underwear. But right now, I can't even *think* about a shopping trip. I've got my hands full getting ready for Betty and Florence. Now come and help me gather up these sheets for the laundry."

"Okay, Mom," said Maryellen. She was disappointed, but even new underwear was better than nothing. And Mom sounded unusually harried. As one of six children, Maryellen had long ago learned the sad but true lesson that parents had only a certain amount of patience and energy and attention to give, and you couldn't use more than your share or your parents got mad. So she quietly helped Mom with the sheets. She'd save the shopping conversation for later.

* * *

After lunch, Mrs. Larkin said, "Kids, I've got to scrub the kitchen floor. I need you out of my hair and out of the house for a while. So why don't you all go to the beach?" She turned to Davy, who had come over for lunch, and said, "Davy, ask your mom if you may go, too, if you like."

The girls hurried off to put on their swimsuits. The

Larkins lived in Daytona Beach, Florida, just a few blocks from the ocean. Maryellen felt lucky that on hot days like this one, she could go to the beach to swim and cool off.

Maryellen was ready in a flash, so she went back to the kitchen, where Mom was helping Mikey put on his bathing trunks. Maryellen saw an old photo that she'd never seen before on the kitchen table. The photo was of Mom and two smiling ladies standing in front of a factory. Maryellen immediately figured out that the two ladies were Betty and Florence. "Hey, Mom," she asked as she looked at the photo, "what did you and Betty and Florence do at the factory?"

"Well, they worked on the assembly line, and I was the line manager," said Mrs. Larkin.

"The manager?" repeated Maryellen. "You mean you were the boss of the whole assembly line?"

"I sure was," said Mom, tying Mikey's shoelaces.

Maryellen was stunned. She had never realized that Mom had had such an important job! And now Mom just stayed home and made life organized and smooth and pleasant for their family. "What do Betty and Florence do now?" Maryellen asked.

"They're secretaries at an airline company in New York," said Mom.

"Oh," said Maryellen. Mom's friends' jobs sounded

swank and fancy. She asked, "Are you sorry you're not working now, Mom?"

"Ellie, my dear," said Mom in a jokey way as she pulled a T-shirt down over Mikey's head, "managing you kids is harder work than managing the assembly line was."

By now, everyone was ready to go. Mom handed some beach towels to Joan and said, "Okay, troops! Off you go to the beach. Be back by two, no later. Joan, keep an eye on the little ones. Vamoose!"

"Okay, Mom," everyone said. "Bye!"

Davy joined the parade of Larkins walking to the beach, falling in step with Scooter and Maryellen. "What's up, Doc?" Davy asked, pretending to be Bugs Bunny.

"I'm thinking about Mom," said Maryellen, "and what her life was like when she had a job during the war. Guess what? It turns out that Mom was important! She was a line boss at the factory."

"Wow!" said Davy. "Why'd she quit?"

"Lots of women quit working after the war," said Carolyn, "so the returning soldiers could have jobs."

"Mom shouldn't have quit. She was famous," Beverly sighed, "like a movie star."

"Well, she wasn't exactly a movie star, but she was the star of the factory back when Betty and Florence worked with her," said Maryellen. "And now Mom's life is about

as exciting and glamorous as . . . as . . .”

“Scooter’s,” Davy finished for her.

“Yes,” sighed Maryellen. Her heart swelled with love and sympathy for Mom. Probably Mom felt sort of taken for granted. Maryellen knew how *that* felt. Surely Mom missed standing out and being admired, as she had been when she was an important boss at the factory. Maryellen made up her mind right then: *I’m going to think of a way for Mom to impress her friends.* Her next thought made her so excited, her heart skipped a little skip: *And then Mom will be impressed with* ***me.***

* * *

Maryellen loved the ocean: its roar, its salty tang, and the huge blueness of it stretching all the way to the sky. “Last one in is a rotten egg!” she challenged Carolyn and Davy.

Legs pumping, arms waving, the three kids raced across the scorching sand. Maryellen plunged headfirst into an incoming wave. *Swoosh!* She had timed it just right, so that the wave lifted her up into the bright summery air.

"Ya*hoo*!" Maryellen hooted exuberantly.

In a second, Carolyn popped up next to Maryellen in the water. "All right," she said. "You win."

Davy popped up next. "I guess I'm the rotten egg," he said. "But watch out—*someday* I'll be faster than you."

Maryellen doubted it. Davy was a pretty good runner, but Maryellen was fiercely determined when it came to running. She had had a sickness called polio when she was younger, and one leg was a little bit weaker than the other. Sometimes Maryellen worried that Mom babied her because of her leg. But Maryellen never let her leg slow her down. She still remembered two years ago when she was sick. The local swimming pool had closed that year to avoid spreading polio. Ever since then, Dad had put the kibosh on going to the community pool. It was forbidden.

Although it was fun to be at the beach with Davy and her brothers and sisters, Maryellen missed Dad. He always rode the waves with her. She floated in the water and looked back at the shore. Queen Beverly was building a sand castle. Tom and Mikey kept knocking her castle down, so after a little while, Davy got out of the water to help her by distracting them. "Hey, boys!" Davy shouted as he walked up the beach. "Let's dig a hole to China."

Joan was lying on a beach towel, reading as usual. Scooter snoozed next to her.

"Say, Joan," Carolyn called. "Come on in—the water's fine."

Joan didn't even take her eyes off her book. "No thanks," she called back.

"I bet she doesn't want to get her hair wet," Carolyn said to Maryellen. "She has a tennis date with Jerry later."

"Oooh, a date!" said Maryellen, instantly interested. Jerry was Joan's boyfriend. He went to college and had a car. Maryellen thought Jerry was a dreamboat because he was so handsome. Even though she was still mad at Joan for the crabby, critical things she'd said that morning, Maryellen had to admit that pretty Joan and handsome Jerry were the perfect couple.

A brilliant thought came to her. If Joan married Jerry, she'd move out and go to live with him. Then she'd stop picking on Maryellen all the time—and Maryellen would have only Mom to win over about the All-Girls Room.

Maryellen turned to Carolyn, who knew all about love and marriage because she was in high school, and asked, "Do you think Joan and Jerry will get married?"

"Well," said Carolyn, "millions of girls get married after high school. And Joan and Jerry are already going steady. The next step is for Jerry to give Joan his fraternity pin. That means they're engaged to be engaged. Then

he gives her an engagement ring, and *then* comes the wedding."

"Gee," said Maryellen. "I didn't realize there were so many steps. I was sort of hoping they'd get married *soon*."

"Me too," said Carolyn. "I love weddings! I wonder if Joan would let us be bridesmaids."

"Maybe you and I could *encourage* Joan and Jerry," said Maryellen.

"How?" asked Carolyn.

"Well, first of all, we could give Jerry a little nudge," said Maryellen, "and tell him to hurry up and propose to Joan."

"Yikes," said Carolyn. "I'm too chicken to do *that*."

"I'm not," said Maryellen. "Jerry's not scary."

"It's not Jerry I'm scared of," said Carolyn. "It's Joan. She'd skin us alive if she found out."

"She doesn't need to know," said Maryellen. "We'll just talk to Jerry sometime when Joan's not around."

Carolyn began to say, "Joan won't—" But right then, Davy came splashing back into the water.

"Come on," he said. "Let's do underwater somersaults."

"Okay!" said Maryellen and Carolyn, putting the topic of marriage aside.

Extraordinary, Not Extra Ordinary

Chapt 3

In a little while, Joan stood up and called out, "Okay, kids! Time to go home."

Normally, everyone would beg to stay longer at the beach. But today, Maryellen, Davy, and Carolyn ran up to the umbrella and toweled off and put their shoes on, and Beverly and the little boys picked up their sand pails and shovels and got ready to walk home without a murmur. Today Betty and Florence were coming!

Maryellen rushed to help Joan shake the sand off her beach towel and fold it neatly. Joan said nothing, but she raised her eyebrows at Maryellen's unusual eagerness to be neat. Then Joan tucked her towel and book under her arm, put Mikey in his stroller, and took Tom by the hand. Carolyn, Maryellen, and Beverly hoisted the beach umbrella onto their shoulders and carried it, all in a row, with Maryellen in the middle. Davy brought up the rear, herding sluggish Scooter homeward.

Maryellen knew just about everyone who lived in the houses on her street. She waved at the neighbors who were out in their yards, washing the car, mowing the

lawn, or sitting and sipping lemonade. She had always liked how safe and familiar her neighborhood was, and how homey the pretty little matching houses were, all lined up in rows, facing one another cheerfully across the street. Each house had a driveway, a carport, a small lawn, and a palm tree. But suddenly, today, the sameness felt flat. Today, it occurred to Maryellen that the neighborhood might look dull to Betty and Florence. They lived in New York City, for heaven's sake! Maryellen had never been to New York, but she knew that it was an exciting, bustling big city full of action and variety. And she could tell that Mom wanted to impress Betty and Florence. How could their home be impressive if it was just like all the other houses on the street?

"You can hardly tell these houses apart," Maryellen said aloud. "We should do something to make *our* house stand out."

"Like what?" asked Carolyn.

"I don't know yet," said Maryellen. "But I'll think of *some*thing."

As they walked up the driveway, Maryellen thought hard about what she could do to make their house look *extraordinary* instead of *extra ordinary*. Davy waved goodbye and went next door to his own house. Mom met them at the kitchen door, standing in the shade of the carport.

She was wearing a dress and a hat and high-heeled sandals, and the car keys jingled in her hand. "I'm on my way to the airport to pick up Betty and Florence," Mom said.

"Wow, Mom, you look beautiful," said Maryellen. "You look just like a mother on TV." That was Maryellen's highest compliment. It worried her a little bit that most of the time, Mom distinctly did not look like one of the mothers on TV who vacuumed their spotless houses wearing high heels and pearls and always had a chocolate cake on hand. Instead, Mrs. Larkin usually wore sneakers, pedal pushers, and one of Dad's old shirts. But today, Maryellen saw that Mom's fingernails and toenails had fire-engine-red polish on them. They were as red and shiny and eye-popping as Mom's red lipstick. Now Maryellen was absolutely positive: Mom *really* wanted to impress Betty and Florence. Oh, she ached to help Mom do just that!

That's when Maryellen had a great idea about how to snazz up their house. She thought of a surefire way that she could make their house stand out from every other

house on the street. She couldn't *wait* to make it happen.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Larkin was saying, "Thank you, darling. Everything is spick-and-span and perfect for Betty and Florence, and I want it to stay that way. So everyone, please hose off your feet before you go inside. I don't want you tracking sand all over my clean kitchen floor."

"Okay, Mom," said everybody.

"What smells so good?" asked Carolyn.

"Oh, I'm glad you reminded me," said Mom. "There are brownies in the oven. Take them out when the timer dings, okay? But don't eat any."

"Okay, Mom," said everybody again, but Maryellen was so excited about her idea that she wasn't really paying much attention.

"Well, all right. I'd better go," said Mrs. Larkin. As she drove away in the car, she waved and called out the window, "Be good!"

"Okay, Mom," said everybody one more time.

Hurray, thought Maryellen, happy and excited. *Mom's finally gone. Now I can work on my surprise.*

* * *

The hose was right next to the kitchen door. Tom, who always liked to pretend that he was a fireman, held the hose while Joan washed the sand off Mikey's feet. Then

Tom squirted Scooter, who sat agreeably and let him do it.

Maryellen hurriedly changed out of her bathing suit, went to the carport, and began rummaging around on Dad's workbench for red paint and a paintbrush. She was going to paint the front door of their house red, *really* red: bright, shiny, eye-catching, fingernail-polish, lipstick-y red. No one else in the neighborhood had a red front door! Betty and Florence would be so impressed. They'd say to Mom, "My goodness, Kay! Your house really stands out from the rest. It's extraordinary! It's the only one with a bright red door!" And Mom would smile proudly and say, "Maryellen painted our door red. It was her idea. She always has great ideas!" And *then*, when Betty and Florence talked to Maryellen for the first time, they wouldn't say what people *usually* said, which was, "You're Maryellen? Which one are you, the second, third, or fourth sister?" Instead, they would say, "You're *Maryellen*? Oh! You're the one with all the great ideas!"

Maryellen was so intent on imagining Mom's pride and Betty's and Florence's admiration, and so focused on her search for paint, that she jumped when Beverly's squeaky voice asked, "What are you doing?"

Maryellen turned to see Beverly, Tom, Mikey, and Scooter standing in a row behind her, watching her. Beverly was wearing her baseball-cap crown. Except for

Scooter, they were all eating orange Popsicles, so their mouths were wreathed in orange stickiness.

"What are you doing?" asked Beverly again.

"Nothing," Maryellen answered. "Go find Carolyn."

"She left for her piano lesson," said Beverly. "She said to tell you to take the brownies out."

"What about Joan?" said Maryellen.

"She's getting ready for Jerry," said Beverly. "She gave us Popsicles and told us to come find you."

Maryellen sighed. She could see that she was stuck with Beverly, Tom, Mikey, and Scooter as an audience for her project whether she liked it or not. "All right," she said briskly. "I'm going to paint the front door red, like Mom's fingernail polish. You can watch. But don't get in the way."

Maryellen found a can of red paint and a paintbrush left over from when Dad had touched up Tom's fire truck. The paint was sort of lumpy and smelly, and the brush had dried so that it was stiffened into a hard curve. Maryellen knew that before starting her project, she should clean the brush with turpentine, but she didn't have time to fuss. She had to finish her surprise before Mom and Betty and Florence came home. To make herself faster and taller, Maryellen put on her roller skates. She pictured herself gliding smoothly as she painted, like the

waitresses on roller skates at a drive-up restaurant.

"I want to paint, too," said Beverly. She and Mikey trailed along behind Maryellen as she roller-skated to the front door. Scooter, who had an unerring instinct about where he'd be most in the way, plunked himself down right behind Maryellen.

"I want to paint, too," echoed Tom, pedaling his fire engine along behind them.

"Paint!" said Mikey.

"No," said Maryellen.

"Why?" asked Beverly.

"Because there's only one brush."

"Can I have a turn with it?" asked Beverly.

"Me, too?" asked Tom.

"Paint!" said Mikey.

"No," said Maryellen shortly.

"Why not?" asked Beverly.

"Because it was my idea and I'm doing it," said Maryellen. She sounded crosser than she meant to. The truth was that she was cross at *herself*, because only now that she looked at the front door did she realize that it might have been a good idea to wash the door first. The old white paint was pretty dirty. But there really wasn't time. And besides, once the door was covered with a nice fresh coat of red paint, nobody would be able to see the dirt.

So Maryellen plunged ahead. *It's just a door. How hard can it be?* she thought to herself. She remembered seeing a TV commercial in which a lady painted her whole living room all by herself, and there was nothing to it! Maryellen pretended to be in that TV commercial. She held the can of paint in one hand, dipped the brush into it, and boldly swiped a stroke of red on the middle slat of the white front door.

"Uh-oh," said Beverly.

"Uh-oh what?" asked Maryellen, even though she had spotted a problem, too.

"It's all bumpy," said Beverly.

"Oh, no one will see," said Maryellen airily, even though it was easy to see that she'd painted over dead bugs, and their bodies were now permanently attached to the door, like raised polka dots. She was glad when Joan's boyfriend, Jerry, drove up in his convertible hot rod. He would be a great distraction for her pesky audience.

"Hi, Jerry!" Maryellen, Beverly, and Tom called. Maryellen turned and waved her paintbrush.

"Hi, kids," said Jerry as he got out of his car and came up the front walk. Maryellen thought he looked very handsome in his white tennis outfit. "What's with the paint, Ellie?"

"Paint!" said Mikey.

"I'm painting our door red," Maryellen explained. "It's a surprise for Mom."

"She'll be surprised, all right," said Jerry. "I guess I'd better knock on the kitchen door to let Joan know I'm here for our date."

Maryellen seized the opportunity, even though she knew she was risking Joan's wrath. "Speaking of dates," she said to Jerry, "have you ever thought about *setting* a date? To marry Joan, I mean."

"To—to what?" Jerry sputtered. He looked surprised.

"Marry Joan," Maryellen plowed on doggedly. "She's almost eighteen, you know. She'll graduate from high school next June. And millions of girls get married right after they graduate."

Jerry looked stunned, as if someone had bonked him on the noggin. He was speechless.

Maryellen pressed on. "You had better ask her soon," she advised Jerry. "She's awfully pretty, and very popular, and—" But Maryellen didn't have a chance to finish her sentence, because just then, everything happened at once.

Beverly had finished her Popsicle and was now dipping the stick into the paint can and painting her fingernails red. Suddenly she stopped and looked up. "Ellie," she asked, "what's that smell?"

Maryellen turned and saw smoke billowing out of

the kitchen door just as Carolyn came running up the driveway waving her piano music and shouting, "Ellie! The brownies—they're burning!"

Joan, rushing out to see what the fuss was, flung open the front door. Maryellen gasped and began to wobble on her roller skates. As her feet flew out from under her and she landed bottom-first in a bush, red paint went flying—all over her, all over the front step, and all over Jerry's white tennis shorts and shirt.

"Hey!" exclaimed Jerry.

"Oh *no*!" shrieked Joan.

Tom, making siren noises and clanging the bell on his fire truck, pedaled to the kitchen door and turned on the hose. He squirted water through the kitchen screen door, trying to put out the fire in the oven like a fireman. Beverly held up her hands, which were covered in red paint, and wailed. Mikey, unperturbed, picked up the paintbrush and began painting red stripes on Scooter, who didn't seem to mind.

And it was at that exact moment that Mrs. Larkin's car pulled into the driveway, horn honking *"Honk, honk!"* to announce its happy arrival.

Taking Responsibility

Chapt 4

OM!" yelled Joan, Carolyn, Maryellen, Beverly, and Tom at the top of their lungs.

"Fire!" yelled Jerry.

"Paint!" yelled Mikey.

"*Ar-oooo!*" howled Scooter.

The car screeched to a stop, and Mrs. Larkin, Betty, and Florence jumped out.

"What's going on?" Mrs. Larkin shouted, over and above all the noise. "Oh, my stars—look at this mess! How on earth did this happen?"

Suddenly, everyone was quiet. None of them had ever seen Mom this mad before.

Maryellen stepped forward. "Mom," she began. Her voice sounded as wobbly as her knees felt. "I was only trying to paint the door. I didn't mean to make a mess. I'm sorry."

"*Sorry?*" Joan repeated. "You've ruined Jerry's tennis clothes. You've ruined our date. You've ruined the front of our house. And all you can say is *sorry*?" Joan put her hands on her hips and leaned toward Maryellen. "This is

just the kind of disaster I was talking about earlier. When are you going to grow up?" She stormed off with Jerry, holding him by the arm, but gingerly, so that she wouldn't get red paint on her tennis dress.

"Oh, Ellie," moaned Mom. She closed her eyes and pressed her red fingertips to her forehead. Then she opened her eyes and said, "Ellie, I will speak to you about this privately. Carolyn, please help Betty and Florence get settled, and then give them a glass of iced tea on the back patio."

"Sure, Mom," said Carolyn. Everyone skedaddled, and Jerry and Joan drove away. Mom and Maryellen were alone.

Maryellen picked up the paintbrush and the paint can and tried to explain. "I only wanted to—"

But Mom interrupted. "No explanations right now, please. And just leave the mess," she said flatly. "We'll deal with it later, after Betty and Florence have left. Honey, I am disappointed in you. It is childish to get so carried away that you don't stop to think. I understand that in a big family like ours, it's hard to get your fair share of attention. But there are better ways of getting attention than showing off and slathering red paint all over. Didn't you promise me just this morning that you'd act more responsibly?"

Maryellen nodded. She was too close to tears to speak. She was sorry to have upset Mom, and she was even sorrier that her surefire way of pleasing Mom had completely backfired. What a flop! What a failure! What a *disaster*.

She sure had failed Mom's test. Now Joan and Mom would *never* agree to the All-Girls Room. Worse than that, instead of thinking that she was more grown-up, Mom and Joan now thought of her as even more messy and irresponsible than before.

* * *

The full moon shone so brightly into the bedroom that Maryellen could not sleep. Lying on her upper bunk, she tossed and turned and couldn't stop thinking of the red paint disaster.

"Jeez Louise, Ellie," Joan said sleepily. "Stop spinning around. What are you doing—practicing your underwater somersaults? Go to sleep, why don't you?"

"Sorry," said Maryellen. She flinched, expecting Joan to jump all over her again the way she had earlier when Maryellen had used the inadequate word *sorry*.

But Joan didn't. In fact, her voice was kind when she said, "Listen, Ellie-jelly, don't be so hard on yourself. You're upset because your red paint idea didn't work out. But everybody makes a mistake once in a while. Your mistake today just happened to be a lulu."

"*All* my ideas seem to be mistakes," said Maryellen. "They're *all* lulus."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Joan. "You had one good idea today."

"I did?" asked Maryellen. She could hardly believe her ears. "What was it?"

Joan giggled a little. "You told Jerry to, uh, get on the ball," she said.

Maryellen gulped. "You're not mad about that?" she asked.

"Well, no," said Joan. "In fact, I'm glad you said something."

Maryellen was flabbergasted. "Glad?" she repeated.

"Mm-hmm," said Joan. "Thanks to you, Jerry finally gave me his fraternity pin."

"He did?" squeaked Maryellen.

"Yep," said Joan. "I was hoping that he would pin me before he went back to college in the fall, but of course I couldn't ask him. *Girls* don't propose to *boys*."

"So that means you're engaged to be engaged, right?" Maryellen asked. "And does *that* mean you'll be getting married soon?" Now that Joan was being so nice, Maryellen wasn't sure she wanted her to leave—not right away, at least.

"No, we won't be getting married for a while yet," said

Joan. "So don't say anything to Mom and Dad. Jerry and I want to talk to them together, because it's a pretty big deal. Getting pinned *does* mean there's a wedding in our future."

"Oh boy!" said Maryellen. "A wedding! Can I help you plan it?"

"You bet," said Joan. "So, see? Not all of your ideas are bombs. Even this All-Girls Room isn't as bad as I thought it would be. I have more space in here, and you organized your stuff pretty well. After Betty and Florence leave, I think I'll tell Mom it's all right with me to make the move permanent."

"Really?" asked Maryellen, her heart lifting.

"Really," said Joan. She yawned, and then she said, "You still have to get Mom to agree, though. Now if you could just come up with another one of your Great Ideas to undo the mess you made with the red paint out front, you'd be all set. Meanwhile, go to sleep, okay?"

"I'll try," said Maryellen. Full of gratitude for Joan's forgiveness, she closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep. But her brain kept going over and over what Joan had said. *Undo the mess, undo the mess . . . How,* Maryellen thought, *can I undo the mess?*

* * *

Maryellen slid out of bed and quietly tiptoed outside

into the balmy Florida night. She skittered over the grass in her bare feet and slipped through the hedge that divided her yard from Davy's.

Tap, tappety, tap, tap. Tap, ***tap.*** Maryellen used her fingernail to beat their secret signal on Davy's bedroom window.

After a moment, Davy appeared. He took one look at Maryellen and climbed out his window. "What's up, Doc?" he whispered.

Maryellen held one finger to her lips to signal *quiet.* With the other hand, she gestured to Davy to follow her as she led the way to the garage and to Dad's workbench. She handed Davy the can of red paint and the paintbrush, and gathered up rags, a scrub brush, and the tin of turpentine. Then she led Davy to the front of the house.

"Holy cow," breathed Davy when he saw the paint mess. "What happened here?"

"It's a long story," Maryellen sighed sadly. "Anyway, would you finish painting the door while I scrub the step?"

"Sure," said Davy without hesitation. Just then, Scooter ambled into view. "Holy *cow*!" Davy exclaimed softly. "Get a load of Scooter's stripes. He looks like a pudgy tiger, for Pete's sake!"

"Hi, old boy," Maryellen said to Scooter. "I'm afraid

Davy took one look at Maryellen and climbed out his window. "What's up, Doc?" he whispered.

your shampoo will have to wait."

The front of the house was bathed in moonlight. As Davy started on the front door, Maryellen soaked her rags in turpentine and scrubbed and *scrubbed* to remove the red paint from the front step. How had it splattered so far and wide? The turpentine had a sharp smell that made her eyes sting and nose run. But Maryellen did not give up.

Davy seemed to enjoy painting. "Hey, let's pretend we're in an episode of a TV show about pirates," he suggested.

"Or how about if we're explorers," said Maryellen, perking up, "and we were sailing the seven seas when we were *captured* by the pirates? They make us work day and night! You're painting the mast, and I'm swabbing the decks of the pirate ship. But pretty soon, with our brave companion, Sea Wolf—that's Scooter—we'll jump overboard and swim away."

"Good idea," said Davy. "Ahoy there, Sea Wolf!"

Scooter thumped his tail to show that he was in on the game.

Pretending helped the time go faster, but it still felt to Maryellen as though she was scrubbing for hours. Her knees hurt, her arm was sore, and her hands felt rubbed raw.

At last, most of the splattered red paint was gone.

Maryellen thought the step looked a bit pinkish, but perhaps it was just a trick of the moonlight. Davy finished painting the door, and then he and Maryellen wiped their hands on the turpentine rags and washed them with the hose.

Davy saluted and said quietly, "Anchors aweigh, matey."

Maryellen saluted back. She sure hoped Joan was wrong about not being friends with a boy in fourth grade. Davy was such a good pal. "Anchors aweigh," she said. "And Davy, thank you."

Davy grinned. "Any time," he said and then zipped home.

Maryellen sneaked back to bed, tired and smelling of turpentine.

* * *

The next morning, Mom woke Maryellen with a kiss. She opened her eyes to see Mom smiling at her. "Hey, Ellie," Mom said softly. "Are you the magic fairy who scrubbed away the red paint?"

Maryellen nodded. "And Davy painted the door," she said.

"That was a big job," said Mom. "And that's what I call taking responsibility. You're forgiven for yesterday. You know, I rather like having a red door and a pink step out

front. And I bet Dad will like them, too! Come on, let's have breakfast. Betty is making pancakes."

"Yes, *ma'am*," said Maryellen. She hugged Mom hard for a moment and then bounced out of bed. She was so happy and relieved that she practically flew into the kitchen.

After breakfast, Mom and Betty and Florence got all dolled up. As soon as they left for their reunion, the house felt dull and empty. Maryellen was glad to see Mom when she got home that afternoon, after having dropped Betty and Florence off at the airport.

"Was the reunion luncheon fun?" Maryellen asked Mom. She wondered if seeing her old coworkers made Mom wish she were still the star of the factory.

"Yes, it was," said Mom as she kicked off her high heels and took off her hat. "It was lovely to see everyone again. But do you know, Betty and Florence said that they had more fun here at our house. They said it was far more entertaining than the reunion." Mom winked at Maryellen, who blushed. "Betty and Florence got a big kick out of you kids. They told me that Dad and I are lucky to have such a lively, rowdy family." Mom hugged Mikey and tousled Tom's hair. "And I think they're exactly right."

"Well," said Joan. "*Most* of the time."

And everyone—even Maryellen—laughed.

* * *

The very next day, Maryellen was in her bedroom sketching hairdos when Mom popped her head in and said, "I checked, and just as I suspected, you *do* need new socks and underwear. How would you like to go shopping today?"

"Sure," said Maryellen.

"All right then," said Mom. "Let's go!"

So, just like *that*, Maryellen found herself skipping happily through the shopping center parking lot next to Mom, trying to keep up with her mother's long strides. She was excited and delighted to be on a shopping trip, even if it *was* only for underwear and *not* for a new dress to wear on the first day of school instead of Carolyn's plaid hand-me-down. That didn't matter. The important thing was that today, for a few hours at least, Maryellen had Mom *all to herself.*

The Poodle Skirt

Chapt 5

aryellen and Mom walked into the cool air-conditioning of O'Neal's, the nicest department store at the shopping center, and rode the stately silver escalator up to the Girls' Department on the second floor. As Maryellen stepped off the escalator, she came to a sudden stop. There on a mannequin, right before her very eyes, was the most wonderful outfit she had ever seen. It was a pink blouse, a black patent leather belt, and a very, very full black felt skirt with a pink poodle appliqué on it.

"Oh, Mom, *look*," said Maryellen exuberantly. "A poodle skirt!" She touched the poodle's shiny black button eyes and traced the loops of its leash. "Isn't this the cutest outfit in the world?"

"It's cute," said Mom briskly. "But we're here for underwear."

"Yes, of course," said Maryellen. Dutifully, she followed Mom to the underwear section.

"While we're here, let's get underwear for Tom and Dad, too," said Mom.

Maryellen swallowed a groan. Underwear for boys

and men was even more boring than underwear for girls. But she was patient as Mom chose underpants for Tom and boxer shorts for Dad. And she was patient while she and Mom waited in line to pay for their purchases at the checkout counter, though she couldn't help looking longingly over her shoulder at the poodle skirt in the Girls' Department. A small, sad sigh escaped her.

Mom heard the sigh, and saw what Maryellen was gazing at. "Ellie, sweetie," Mom said with a note of warning in her voice, "we're not shopping for skirts today, remember? You already have a perfectly fine back-to-school dress—the plaid one from Carolyn. Didn't we agree on that?"

"Yes," said Maryellen. Mom was right: The plaid dress was perfectly fine. It was just so very *ordinary*. She knew that she should not bug Mom about the fabulous poodle skirt, but . . . She gathered her courage, and asked, "Mom, what if I just zipped over there and tried on the skirt while you're waiting here in line?"

"Well, all right," said Mrs. Larkin. "But I won't be long, so don't dillydally."

"I won't," Maryellen promised. She grabbed a skirt in her size off the rack, rushed to a dressing room, and tried the skirt on. The poodle skirt looked even *more* wonderful than she'd expected. She twirled around in

front of the three panels of the dressing-room mirror to make the skirt swing out in a perfect circle, and she was delighted to see hundreds of twirling Maryellens reflected around her in a swirling *swoosh*.

Mom poked her head in around the dressing-room curtain. "Ready to go?" she asked. Maryellen nodded.

Mom looked at Maryellen and raised an eyebrow. "My, but the poodle on that skirt is *pink*," she said dryly. "And pink is a color that I should think you'd like to avoid today. Your hands are still a bit pink from scrubbing away all that red paint."

"Oh, Mom," Maryellen burst out. "You were right—I *did* paint the front door red to show off and get attention. But I also painted it for you. I thought that if our house looked special, your friends would be impressed. They'd see how special *you* are."

"Oh," said Mom. She stepped into the dressing room and sat down hard on the little stool next to the mirror. "Really?" she asked.

Maryellen nodded. "Yes!" she said fervently. "I didn't want our house to look boring and ordinary, because

I didn't want Betty and Florence to think that we were boring and ordinary—especially not *you*."

"I see," said Mom. "You were feeling overlooked and underappreciated, and you thought I was, too. So you wanted to make a big splash for both of us."

Maryellen winced at the word *splash*, but said, "Yes."

"I see," said Mom again. "I'm glad I understand better now. It was sweet of you to think of me and how I might be feeling. And it was good of you to scrub off the red paint, too. I know that was hard work. You made a mess, but you took responsibility for cleaning it up."

"It was actually Joan who sort of gave me the idea," said Maryellen.

"Did she?" said Mom. "It sounds like she's forgiven you for splattering red paint on Jerry."

Maryellen smiled and shrugged. She knew the reason why Joan had forgiven her, but Joan had asked her not to tell Mom about being pinned, so she kept quiet.

"Anyway, you seem to be back in Joan's good graces," Mom went on. "If she gives her approval to the All-Girls Room, then as far as I'm concerned, it's a done deal. You can help Joan and Carolyn move in permanently when we get home."

"Really, Mom?" Maryellen asked. "I'm pretty sure Joan likes it. At least, she told me she did."

Mom stood up, crossed her arms, tilted her head, and observed Maryellen from head to toe. "All of a sudden, you're looking more mature to me, Miss Maryellen Larkin," she said. "And I don't think it's just because of that very chic poodle skirt you're wearing, either."

Maryellen beamed.

"In fact, the more I look at it, the more I think that skirt suits you," said Mom. "It's quite grown-up, and you are, too. Ellie-girl, I think you've found yourself a very glamorous back-to-school skirt, don't you? Let's buy it."

Maryellen gasped. She threw herself at Mom and said, "Oh, thank you, Mom! Thank you, thank you, *thank* you. I love it!"

Maryellen was thrilled. The poodle skirt would be one of the first *new* things, and certainly one of the most *beautiful* things, she'd ever owned in her life! It was fun and fancy and fashionable. She was absolutely sure that the poodle skirt guaranteed she'd have not only a great first day of school but also a great *year* in fourth grade.

Even better, the poodle skirt was a perfect reminder that Mom didn't think of her as a little kid anymore, but as someone more grown-up, whose ideas should be taken seriously. After all, even if *some* of her great ideas did not work out as perfectly as they did in her imaginary TV shows, *some*how *some*times *some* things still ended

happily, just as they had today.

The thought of happy endings reminded Maryellen of her Jerry-and-Joan Wedding Project. "Say, Mom," she asked casually, "on our way out of the store, may we swing through the Bridal Shop?"

"Sure!" said Mom. "That's a great idea. It'll be fun."

Oh boy! thought Maryellen. *A poodle skirt, the All-Girls Room, fourth grade . . . and a wedding to look forward to!* The months to come were sure to be *extra* extraordinary!

* * *

Maryellen often thought she was the luckiest girl in the world, because she had *three* best friends. There was Davy right next door, of course, and then she also had two best girlfriends. If that wasn't fun enough, both girls were named Karen! One was Karen Stohlman and one was Karen King. Maryellen mostly saw the Karens at school, because they lived in a different neighborhood. When summer vacation ended and school started again, she and her three best friends were going to be in fourth grade together.

One afternoon shortly before the first day of school, Karen Stohlman's mother drove the two Karens over to Maryellen's house to play. Mr. Larkin had painted permanent hopscotch squares on the driveway, so the girls were having a hopscotch marathon.

Maryellen tossed her marker, which was an old Popsicle stick, and hopped to the square it landed on, talking at the same time. "I hope Mrs. (hop) Humphrey (hop) is nice (hop, hop, hop)," she said. "Joan and Carolyn had her as their teacher when they were in fourth grade, and they liked her a lot."

Karen Stohlman, who took ballet, rose up on tiptoe and twirled. "I'm so glad the three of us are all in the same class," she said.

"And Davy's in our class, too," Maryellen reminded her, "so this is going to be our best school year ever. I just know it."

"Yes!" said Karen King. Her round, freckly face looked cheerful. "Plus this year we finally get to be Girl Scouts."

"Hurray!" cheered Maryellen, and Karen Stohlman twirled again. Maryellen, Karen, and Karen had liked being Brownies well enough, but they'd been looking forward to being Girl Scouts for years.

"We'll be the *most outstanding* Girl Scouts ever," said Maryellen. "We'll earn *more* badges than anyone else, and sell the *most* Girl Scout cookies, and have the *most* fun on the hikes."

"Do you two have your uniforms yet?" asked Karen Stohlman.

"Yes," said Maryellen and Karen King.

"Me too," said Karen Stohlman. "Mine was a little too long, so my mom's hemming it." She didn't say so, but Maryellen knew that Karen Stohlman's Girl Scout uniform was brand-new. She had only an older brother, so all her clothes were new. "You know what's going to be great?" Karen continued. "When we all wear our uniforms, we'll look exactly alike. We'll be triplets!"

"Uh, not exactly," said Maryellen. "My uniform is a hand-me-down. First Joan wore it, then Carolyn. It's so old that it's different from the new ones. It has long sleeves."

"Oh," said Karen Stohlman, sounding disappointed. She always liked the girls to be the *same*.

"My uniform is a hand-me-down, too," sighed Karen King, "from my sister Kathy. She's really hard on her clothes. They look like they've been through a hurricane by the time I get them."

"I know what you mean," said Maryellen. "My clothes go through both Joan and Carolyn before they come to me." Maryellen thought with a *zing* of excitement, not *all* of her clothes were previously worn. The Karens did not know about the wonderful new skirt with a pink French poodle that she was going to wear on the first day of fourth grade. Maryellen had been planning to keep her skirt a secret and to surprise Karen and Karen with it on

the first day of school, but she was so excited about it that she thought she might pop.

"Guess what?" Maryellen said to the Karens. "Mom and I went shopping at O'Neal's, and now I have something brand-new to wear on the first day of school!"

"You went to O'Neal's?" gasped Karen King. "You lucky duck!"

"What did you get?" asked Karen Stohlman.

"Well, it's a . . ." Maryellen stopped. The poodle skirt was simply too wonderful to describe in mere words. To be fully appreciated, it had to be seen in all its pink-poodle glory. "Come on inside," she said impulsively, "so you can see it."

The three girls dropped their hopscotch markers and stampeded inside. Maryellen led her friends to her room. There, carefully displayed on a chair, was her poodle skirt. Both Karens gasped in appreciation.

"Isn't it the cutest skirt you've ever seen?" asked Maryellen.

"Yes!" said Karen Stohlman. "I wish I had one, too!"

"On the first day of school, I'm going to wear a pink blouse that Carolyn gave me," said Maryellen, "and I'm going to borrow Carolyn's crinoline, to make the skirt stick out."

"Goll-lee," sighed Karen King. "Ellie Larkin, you'll be the

most fashionable girl in the fourth grade. Everybody will be impressed. You'll look like a movie star." Karen pointed to a photo of Maryellen's favorite movie star, Debbie Reynolds, which Maryellen had taped to her mirror. "If you cut your bangs shorter, you'd look just like Debbie Reynolds."

Maryellen beamed. She held the poodle skirt to her waist and twirled around, saying, "I can't wait to wear it on the first day of school."

"If I had one, I'd wear it *every* day," said Karen Stohlman.

"Put it on so we can see how it fits," said Karen King.

But just then, Tom stuck his head in the door. "Mrs. Stohlman's here," he said.

"Oh, no, we've got to go," said Karen King, turning to leave. "Well, see you on the first day of school."

"Yes!" said Maryellen. "Davy and I will ride our bikes like always, and I'll meet you on the playground. See you later, alligator!"

"See you soon, raccoon," said the Karens. "Bye!"

After the girls left, Maryellen practically danced in to dinner, filled with happy anticipation. This was going to be the best school year ever.

Tickled Pink

Chapt 6

On the first day of school, Maryellen woke up very early. *This is it!* she thought with a shiver of nervousness. Silently, Maryellen sat up in bed. She could see her gorgeous poodle skirt waiting for her, draped neatly on the chair. Yesterday, the last day of summer vacation, Carolyn had very nicely ironed her hand-me-down pink blouse, and Maryellen had polished a pair of oxfords she had inherited from Carolyn, so they looked shiny and ready to go.

Finally, Maryellen couldn't wait a moment longer. She anchored her feet between the mattress and the wall and dangled her head and arms off the top bunk so that she could tug on Carolyn's pillow.

"Carolyn!" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," said Carolyn right away.

"Let's get up and get dressed," said Maryellen.

"Okay," said Carolyn. "But be quiet. Don't wake up Joan." Maryellen, Carolyn, and even Queen Beverly had learned the hard way that Joan was very cross and snappish if she was awakened one minute too early.

"Thanks for letting me borrow your crinoline," Maryellen said softly as Carolyn helped her slip it on over her head. The crinoline would go under the skirt to make it puff out a bit more.

"You're welcome," said Carolyn, who seemed almost as excited about the poodle skirt as Maryellen was. Carolyn was quite a bit taller than Maryellen, so they had to pull the crinoline up to Maryellen's armpits to keep it from hanging below the hem of the poodle skirt.

"I'm like a bride," joked Maryellen. "I've got something old—my shoes—and something new—my skirt—and something borrowed—your crinoline. All I need is something blue."

"Well, what color's your underwear?" asked Carolyn.

This made both Maryellen and Carolyn dissolve into giggles. They clamped their hands over their mouths to stifle their laughter, which of course only made them giggle harder.

"Oh, honestly!" moaned Joan, rising from her pillow, looking cranky. "You two are about as quiet as cackling hens." She propped herself up on her elbow and scrutinized Maryellen. "Pretty good, Ellie-deli," she said. "But your hair should be in a ponytail. And the shoes are all wrong. Poodle skirts go with sneakers or saddle shoes, not oxfords." Then she yawned and sank back into her pillow.

Maryellen and Carolyn stared down at the clunky brown oxfords on Maryellen's feet. They both knew that Joan was right. Without saying a word, Maryellen slipped off the oxfords. Her summer sneakers had grass stains and holes in the toes, so she put on her saddle shoes from last year. The saddle shoes felt a bit tight, but they looked, as Carolyn said softly, "Perfect."

Then Maryellen and Carolyn wrangled Maryellen's hair into a ponytail tied with a scarf.

Carolyn went off to the bathroom, and Maryellen checked herself against the photos of Debbie Reynolds. She spotted a problem. Karen Stohlman was right: Debbie Reynolds's bangs were much shorter than hers. In fact, all the movie stars and models who wore poodle skirts had short bangs. Even Mamie Eisenhower, President Eisenhower's wife, wore short bangs.

Well, how hard could it be to cut my bangs? It looks easy when Mom does it, Maryellen thought. She got scissors out of the desk, and *snip, snip, snip,* cut her bangs in a line across her forehead.

Hmm, thought Maryellen as she looked in the mirror. For some reason, her shortened bangs did not go straight across her forehead, like Debbie Reynolds's

and Mamie Eisenhower's. Instead, her bangs slanted diagonally, longer on one side and shorter on the other. Maryellen immediately cut the longer side to make it match, and then looked in the mirror again. Now her bangs looked sort of zigzaggy.

She was trimming the ends to even them up when Carolyn returned from the bathroom and gasped, "STOP!"

Joan sat bolt upright in bed. "Oh, my gosh, Ellie. You look like you got chopped by hedge clippers!"

"I do *not*," said Maryellen huffily. She didn't want to let on that, now that she really looked at her bangs, she was surprised—*horrified*, actually—by what she had done. It had happened so fast! Just *snip, snip, snip,* and now . . . DISASTER! The short, spiky bangs stuck straight out from her forehead. *I look like I have toothbrush bristles attached to my head,* thought Maryellen miserably. Oh, how she wished she could tape her hair back on!

Maryellen put the scissors down and gathered up the snippets of hair from the floor. Her voice was only a little bit wavery when she said, "I think they look okay."

"They're much too short," said Joan, stating the obvious.

"Never mind," said Carolyn kindly. "Your bangs will grow fast."

"Wait till Mom sees you," said Joan. "She'll have a fit."

"Joan, will you cut it out?" said Carolyn. "You're making Ellie feel bad. How would you like to start the first day of school with a terrible haircut?"

Now Maryellen was upset *and* worried. She tugged at her bangs as if she could make them longer by pulling on them. She smoothed them and pushed them down to make them lie flat, but it was no use. As soon as she took her hand off them, her bangs sprang up and stuck straight out over her forehead like a sailor's salute.

"Girls!" Mom called from the kitchen. "Time for breakfast."

Maryellen took a deep, shuddery breath. *What is Mom going to say?* she wondered, full of dread. She was grateful when Carolyn grabbed her hand as they walked together to the kitchen.

When Mom saw Maryellen, her eyebrows shot up. "Ellie," Mom gasped. "What on earth have you done?"

"I, well, I . . . " Maryellen faltered.

Mom held up her hand. "You don't need to tell me," she said. "I can see for myself. You cut your own bangs."

Tom, whose hair stuck straight out all over his head, said, "I *like* your new bangs, Ellie."

"Bang!" yelled Mikey, banging his fist on his high-chair tray. "Bang, bang, bang!"

"I'm sorry, Mom," said Maryellen. "Are you mad?"

"Well," said Mom. "I'm . . . *surprised*. But what's done is done and can't be undone. Besides, you're the one who has to wear the bangs, not me. But Ellie, honey, please talk to me first before you do any more do-it-yourself barbering."

"Oh, *Mom*," wailed Maryellen. She ran to Mom and threw her arms around her and hid her face against her. "Now I don't want to go to school at all!"

"I understand how you feel," Mom said, hugging her. "But you're just going to have to face school, short bangs and all."

"And hey, your new skirt looks nice," said Dad cheerfully, looking up from his coffee. "It's a doozy!"

"That's right. Just concentrate on your snazzy new skirt," Mom advised. "There's no question that, outfit-wise, you are going to be *the most* fashionable girl in the fourth grade. Right?"

Maryellen managed a watery grin. "I guess so."

Mom kissed Maryellen's exposed forehead. "Eat your cereal. Soon it'll be time to go."

Maryellen sat at the table, one hand pressed against her bangs, and the other holding a spoon, with which she only pretended to eat. Her stomach was tied in knots.

The knots tightened when the doorbell rang and Joan, who was wafting by the front door, called out, "Ellie, it's

Davy, and he's got some other little boy with him."

"It's that mean boy, Wayne," Beverly hissed.

"Oh no!" Maryellen whispered. "*Wayne?*" Maryellen and Davy had planned to ride their bikes to school together, as they always did, but Davy hadn't said anything about including *Wayne*, of all people.

"I can't face them!" Maryellen said in a panic. "Please, somebody, tell them I'm not ready! Tell them I'm sick! Tell them I left already!"

Mom shook her head. "You're going to have to face people sooner or later," she said. "You might as well get it over with."

"I can't," Maryellen wailed. "Wayne is sure to say something smart-alecky."

"This is what happens when girls try to be friends with boys in fourth grade," said Joan. "It never works."

"*I'll* handle the boys," said Carolyn heroically. Maryellen cowered in the breakfast nook while Carolyn went straight to the front door and flung it open. "Boys, Ellie told me to tell you that she doesn't want to bike to school with you," Carolyn said firmly. "She's afraid she'll get too sweaty, and she doesn't want to ruin her outfit."

Maryellen heard Wayne snort and mutter, "Typical girl!"

Davy just said, "Oh." He sounded disappointed and confused. Maryellen didn't blame him, because Carolyn's

excuse did not ring true; Davy knew that Maryellen was the kind of girl who *never* worried about getting messy.

"You'd better get going, boys," Carolyn said in a no-nonsense voice. Then, before she had completely shut the door, Carolyn turned toward the kitchen and called out, "The coast is clear, Ellie. I got rid of the boys like you told me to!"

Maryellen groaned. Now Davy was probably mad at her, because Carolyn had made it sound like Maryellen wanted him to get lost. So far, this sure wasn't the wonderful start to a wonderful year in fourth grade that she had imagined. Maryellen wondered, *Could this morning get any worse?*

* * *

As she rode her bike to school, Maryellen tried to forget about her hair and concentrate on her skirt. If *anything* could salvage this day, the black-and-pink poodle skirt could. Maybe everyone would be so dazzled by her skirt that they wouldn't notice her hair.

When she got to the school playground, where the students were milling around before lining up to go into the school building, Maryellen parked her bike and looked for Davy so that she could apologize to him. Her heart sank when she saw that Davy was shooting baskets with Wayne. Nevertheless, she squared her shoulders and

made herself march toward the boys.

"Hey, Ellie!" a voice shouted. "We're over here!"

Maryellen turned and saw Karen King waving wildly amid the throng of students. She waved back and ran to join Karen and Karen, thinking that really, it would be better to apologize to Davy later, when he was alone. Halfway to the Karens, Maryellen stopped short. She blinked. *Karen Stohlman was wearing a black-and-pink poodle skirt exactly like hers!*

"SURPRISE!" the Karens sang out. Karen Stohlman twirled, lifting her arms over her head like a ballerina. She was wearing a pink blouse and saddle shoes, too.

"Look!" gushed Karen King. "Yesterday, Karen went out and got a poodle skirt just like yours."

"We're twins, Ellie," Karen Stohlman said gaily. "My mother and I went shopping at O'Neal's yesterday, and . . ." She stopped. "Gosh, Ellie—you cut your bangs!"

"Whoa! I'll say!" said Karen King. "Aren't they kind of too short?"

"Yes," said Maryellen sharply. She turned to Karen Stohlman, eager to get off the subject. "So you got your skirt yesterday?"

"Yes!" said Karen Stohlman. "To match yours. Isn't this the best surprise ever?"

"Mm-hmm," said Maryellen. She smiled, because she

knew the Karens expected her to smile. They expected her to be delighted—to be tickled pink!—and she herself thought she should be. But her smile was crooked and forced. She couldn't help noticing that Karen's ponytail was longer than hers, and of course, Karen didn't have ridiculous bristle bangs like her unfortunate ones.

In her heart of hearts, Maryellen had wanted to be unique. She had wanted to stand out as the one-and-only girl in the fourth grade who looked like a movie star. Now she couldn't. In fact, Karen looked more stylish and movie-star-ish than she did. *Karen Stohlman has stolen my idea,* Maryellen thought. *She's a copycat!*

"Patty Zender has the same skirt, too," said Karen King.

"You're kidding!" said Maryellen. For some reason, it made her feel a lot better to know about Patty Zender. *So I wouldn't have been unique even if Karen Stohlman hadn't copied me.*

The idea of three matching poodle skirts on the playground cheered Maryellen up. *Well, we might as well make the best of it,* she thought as she waved Patty over to join them. "Come on, Karen," she said. "The three of us can pretend we're the McDoogal Sisters."

Maryellen held her hand up to her mouth as if it was a microphone and she was on TV. "Ladies and gentlemen,"

she announced. "We're everyone's favorite trio, the McDoogal Sisters, and we're going to sing for you our big hit of 1954, 'Time to Go.'"

Karen Stohlman and Patty giggled, but they sang along with Maryellen, "Time to go, oh, it's time to go . . ." They copied Maryellen and put their hands on their hips and swayed from side to side. When Karen King sang the "doot-dootle-doot-doots" in the background, they twirled around and made their skirts flare out. At the end of the song, they sank down in curtsies, all at the same time.

It turned out to be quite fun to be part of the poodle-skirt trio. Singing and dancing helped Maryellen forget about her terrible bangs and the misunderstanding with Davy. She tucked her disappointment and her annoyance at Karen Stohlman away, deep down in a hidden corner of her heart, and sang—almost—as if she truly *were* tickled pink.

Hand-Me-Down Teacher

Chapt 7

Pretty soon, the school bell clanged and it really was "time to go," or at least time to line up, boys in one line, girls in another. The two Karens, Patty, and Maryellen went upstairs to Mrs. Humphrey's fourth-grade classroom together, feeling grown-up and superior to the third-graders, who were still on the first floor with the other lower grades.

Maryellen's saddle shoes squeezed her toes uncomfortably and went *tsk-tsk-tsk* as she climbed the stairs. It was as if they were scolding her for making the mistake of wearing them even though they were definitely too small.

"Welcome, fourth-graders!" said Mrs. Humphrey as the students entered the room. "Please be seated. Take any desk."

Maryellen sank gratefully into a seat and banged her heels softly on the floor to make space for her toes inside her shoes. The felt poodle skirt was too hot for this sunny September morning, and Carolyn's crinoline itched under her armpits. She wriggled and scratched as inconspicuously as she could.

"Fleas, pardner?" Davy asked sympathetically, from his temporary seat behind her. "On loan from Scooter?"

Maryellen knew that Davy was only joking with her in a friendly way. Even so, she felt a tiny prick of annoyance.

And then Wayne, next to Davy, began to chirrup, "Ooh, ooh! Ah, ah!" as he scratched his head and his armpits, pretending to be a monkey scratching its fleas. Suddenly, he stopped and stared. "Yikes! What happened to *you*, Baldy?"

"Holy cow," breathed Davy, his eyes wide at the sight of Maryellen's sticky-out bangs.

"Hmph!" snorted Maryellen, turning away to hide how hurt she was. She had expected teasing from Wayne, but not from *Davy*. Up till now, Davy had always made her feel better about things, not worse. She decided that she wasn't going to apologize to him for what Carolyn had done. So there!

Maryellen turned her attention to Mrs. Humphrey, who smiled and nodded at the students as they entered. After everyone was seated, Mrs. Humphrey said, "Now I'll call the roll and assign permanent seats alphabetically."

As she waited for her name to be called, Maryellen looked around the fourth-grade classroom. She was glad

to see lots of maps, rolled up like window shades above the blackboard, because she loved thinking about other countries and different languages. She was not so glad to see, above the blackboard, green placards with models of uppercase and lowercase letters swooping along in white script. Handwriting was not her best subject. She recognized all the kids except one new girl, who had long, dark braids and, Maryellen saw with amazement, *pierced ears*!

"Larkin, Maryellen?" Mrs. Humphrey called.

"Present," said Maryellen.

Mrs. Humphrey beamed at Maryellen as she pointed to the desk she wanted her to take. "I could have guessed that you were a Larkin," she said. "You and your sisters Joan and Carolyn are as alike as three peas in a pod. I'd recognize that Larkin nose anywhere. I had your sister Carolyn in my class a few years ago and Joan a few years before that. They were excellent students."

"Yes, Mrs. Humphrey," said Maryellen, thinking, *I'm off to a good start. Mrs. Humphrey likes me already!* She slid into the chair at her assigned desk, which was behind Jimmy Lansing, as usual. After three years behind Jimmy Lansing, she was getting to know the spindly back of *his* neck very well.

"I'll bet you're as tidy and organized as Carolyn and

Joan were, too," said Mrs. Humphrey.

Maryellen's smile faded a bit. *Uh-oh*, she thought. Mrs. Humphrey would soon figure out that she was not tidy or organized. Then again, Mrs. Humphrey would also soon figure out that she wasn't Carolyn or Joan.

The funny thing was, Mrs. Humphrey *didn't* seem to figure that out. As the morning went on, pretty soon everyone in the class knew that when Mrs. Humphrey said "Carolyn," she meant "Maryellen." It was confusing. During math class, whenever Mrs. Humphrey said, "Tell us how to divide these numbers, Care—" Karen King, Karen Stohlman, and Carol Turner all looked up, expecting to be called on. After a while, Maryellen looked up, too, because often Mrs. Humphrey was looking straight at her and calling her Carolyn. If that happened and Maryellen didn't look up, Wayne took it upon himself to lean across the aisle and poke her hard in the ribs and hiss, "She means *you*."

To add to the confusion, when Mrs. Humphrey said "Joan," everyone, including Maryellen, naturally thought that the teacher was calling on Joan Martin, who sat right behind Maryellen. But sometimes Mrs. Humphrey was looking at Maryellen and calling *her* Joan. When that happened, both Maryellen and Joan Martin would answer Mrs. Humphrey at the same time.

Maryellen couldn't help noticing that Mrs. Humphrey was starting to get flustered and look annoyed every time she called her by the wrong name, whether Maryellen responded or not. It was almost as if Mrs. Humphrey suspected Maryellen of trying to trick her deliberately.

This is what happens, thought Maryellen, *when even your teacher is a hand-me-down from your sisters.*

* * *

At lunch that day, Karen King said to Maryellen, "Mrs. Humphrey seems to think that your name is 'Carolyn-Joan-I-mean-Maryellen.'"

Maryellen grinned. Quickly, she drew a sketch on her napkin of a frowning Mrs. Humphrey saying, "Carolyn! Joan! Maryellen! Whoever!" and pointing her finger like Uncle Sam in an army recruitment poster. Under the drawing, she wrote in capital letters: THIS MEANS YOU!

All the girls giggled. Davy, who was passing their table, asked, "What's so funny?"

Wayne, who was right behind Davy, snatched the napkin out of Maryellen's hands. "Get a load of this," he crowed. "A cartoon of Mrs. Humphrey!"

"Give it back!" Maryellen demanded, twisting in her seat.

But Wayne waved the napkin over

Maryellen's head, just out of her reach. "You can't make me," he taunted.

"Got it!" shouted Davy, snatching the napkin out of Wayne's hands.

Just then, someone took the napkin out of Davy's hand. "Hey!" he began to protest, until he saw that it was Mrs. Humphrey.

"Uh-oh," breathed Karen King.

"I am disappointed in you children," said Mrs. Humphrey. "Fighting over a napkin! Is this the proper way for fourth-graders to behave in the lunchroom?"

"No, Mrs. Humphrey," said Davy, Maryellen, and the two Karens. Wayne had somehow disappeared, slithering away in the lunchroom crowd like a snake.

Maryellen got very red in the face while Mrs. Humphrey looked at the drawing on the napkin. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Humphrey," she began.

"Why, I'm surprised at you, Care-Jo-no-oh! Miss Larkin," interrupted Mrs. Humphrey. She held the napkin with the very tips of her fingers as if it were radioactive, tore the napkin in half, dropped the two pieces in the trash, and left.

"Davy! Look what you did," said Maryellen crossly.

"What do you mean?" asked Davy. "I took the napkin away from Wayne to give it back to you."

"Well, if you hadn't been yelling and waving it around, Mrs. Humphrey wouldn't have noticed it," said Maryellen. "You got me into trouble."

"You got yourself into trouble," said Davy, "by drawing the cartoon in the first place."

"I—" Maryellen started to say.

"Never mind!" said Davy. "I'll get lost. That's what you want me to do, right? Just like this morning." He turned on his heel and stormed off.

"Yikes," said Karen King softly. "He's mad."

"Well, I'm mad, too," said Maryellen. "Now Mrs. Humphrey doesn't like me, and it's Davy's fault."

"I think it's Wayne's fault," said Karen King.

"Why does Davy put up with Wayne the Pain, anyway?" said Maryellen crossly. "I don't like him."

"And I don't think Mrs. Humphrey liked your cartoon," said Karen King, who prided herself on telling the truth no matter how unpleasant it might be.

"I never meant for her to see it," said Maryellen miserably. "She may not be sure who I am, but now she *is* sure that she doesn't like me."

"Well, we still like you, Care-Jo-no-oh! Miss Larkin," said Karen King kindly.

"Thanks," said Maryellen. Her smile was weak but grateful. What would she ever do without the Karens, her

two best, best friends, especially *now*, when for the first time ever, she and Davy were on the outs?

* * *

That afternoon, when Maryellen was back at home changing into her play clothes, Joan asked, "So how was the first day of fourth grade?"

"Fine," sighed Maryellen, sounding as if she meant the opposite.

"Mrs. Humphrey is nice, isn't she?" said Carolyn.

"I guess so," said Maryellen gloomily.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," said Joan. "What happened?"

"Mrs. Humphrey kept calling me Joan or Carolyn," Maryellen grumbled, "and I, well, I drew a cartoon about it and she saw it."

"Uh-oh," said Carolyn.

"I didn't mean to be disrespectful," said Maryellen. "Really I didn't. I was just sort of making a joke about how she didn't seem to know that I was me."

"Did you tell Mrs. Humphrey that you were sorry?" asked Joan.

"Yes," said Maryellen. "And I really am sorry."

"Mrs. Humphrey will forgive you," said Joan. "She knows that it's what you do *after* you've made a mistake that matters. Anyway, *everyone* makes mistakes."

"Yes!" Carolyn interjected brightly. "Like your bangs!"

"Ohh," moaned Maryellen, not at all cheered up. "Mrs. Humphrey never would have seen the cartoon if Wayne hadn't snatched it and Davy hadn't waved it around."

"What did I tell you?" said Joan. "You cannot be friends with boys in the fourth grade. They're okay again in high school." Maryellen knew that, of course, Joan was thinking of dreamy Jerry, to whom she was practically engaged. "But right now, Ellie-mellie, if you're smart, you'll concentrate on your friendship with the Karens."

"Right," said Carolyn. "Girls won't let you down."

Maryellen hoped that Carolyn was right—and that Joan was wrong. She really didn't want to have to wait until high school to be friends with Davy again. Deep down, she was sorry about their fight, and she already missed him.

* * *

The next morning, Maryellen put on the plaid school dress and the brown oxfords that she had inherited from Carolyn. She waited, but Davy did not stop by to bike to school with her, so she rode to school by herself.

It was amazing, thought Maryellen as Mrs. Humphrey explained long division, how much better her brain worked when her feet weren't squashed and she didn't

have to worry all the time about Carolyn's crinoline falling down.

When the math lesson was finished, Mrs. Humphrey pulled down the map of the world.

Good, thought Maryellen. She liked geography. She always helped Dad plot their route and read the map when they went on car trips, and she liked to doodle the shapes of different states and countries just for fun.

"Boys and girls," said Mrs. Humphrey, "in fourth grade, we study history, social studies, and current events. To understand any of those subjects, we need to know geography. In fact, geography is so important that we're going to have a class Geography Bee at the end of every month, and the winners will get prizes."

The class murmured with excitement. Maryellen and the Karens exchanged delighted glances, and Maryellen saw Wayne playfully punch Davy in the arm. Everybody loved bees and prizes!

Mrs. Humphrey covered the name of one of the countries on the map of Europe. "Now," she said, "who can tell me the name of this country?"

Maryellen shot her hand up. She knew that the country was Italy, because she knew that Italy was shaped like a boot.

Mrs. Humphrey glanced at Maryellen, but she called

on the new girl with the long braids and earrings, even though the girl had not raised her hand. "Angela?" Mrs. Humphrey said.

The new girl smiled, and her whole face lit up as if the sun was shining on it. "*Italia*," she said.

"Yes, good," said Mrs. Humphrey. "This is the country your family came from. In English, we call it *Italy*."

The class murmured again. Everyone stared at the new girl, who stopped smiling and looked down at her desk.

Oh, so the new girl is ***Italian,*** thought Maryellen. *How different and interesting!*

The Lunch Bunch

Chapt 8

rs. Humphrey covered the name of another country on the map. She had not even asked for its name before almost every hand in the room went up.

"That's East Germany," Davy called out. "Everybody knows that, because the Germans were our enemies in World War Two."

"Japan and Italy were against us, too," added Karen Stohlman with a sideways glance at the new girl. Maryellen hoped Angela did not understand enough English to be offended. Karen Stohlman went on, "My uncle fought in Italy. He was a hero, but the Italians—"

"Yes, well, the war ended in 1945, nearly ten years ago," Mrs. Humphrey interrupted briskly. "The Germans, Italians, and Japanese are not our enemies anymore. Let's move right along, now. Who can tell me the name of the capital of East Germany?"

This time only Maryellen's hand went up.

"Uh, yes?" said Mrs. Humphrey, who seemed to have decided not to call Maryellen by any name at all, much to the relief of everyone in the class.

"The capital of East Germany is Berlin," said Maryellen. She knew all about Berlin because Joan had written a report about it last year, and Maryellen had drawn the maps for her since she was good at sketching. "After the war, Germany was divided up. The Russians have one part, and now their part is behind the Iron Curtain."

"The Russians have a curtain made of *iron*?" asked Wayne, sounding skeptical.

"It isn't real," said Maryellen. "But the Russians won't let people come and go freely and they keep things secret on their side, so it's as if they've closed a curtain. America doesn't like the way the Russians are treating people, so now the Russians are sort of our enemies and we're in a Cold War with them."

"What's a cold war?" Patty Zender asked.

"It means that each side tries to have more bombs than the other side, even though they don't use them," said Maryellen. "We're not fighting battles against the Russians, but we don't trust them and we're not friendly with them, either."

Mrs. Humphrey smiled at Maryellen. "Good explanation," she said. "Splendid."

Maryellen beamed. Maybe Mrs. Humphrey would forgive her for the napkin cartoon and like her again. She was sorry when geography was over and Mrs. Humphrey passed out handwriting workbooks.

Last year, in third grade, all her classmates had been excited about learning to write in script instead of printing. But Maryellen had discovered that because she was left-handed, her letters seemed to lean in the wrong direction, tilting and wobbling so badly that no one could read them. Finally, Maryellen had solved the problem by inventing a sort of fake script for herself, which she made by smooshing printed letters together. She tried hard to make her loopy letters look nice and neat. But no matter how careful she was, she smudged the words she had written when her left hand passed over them.

Mrs. Humphrey came by and looked at Maryellen's work over her shoulder. She didn't say anything, but Maryellen knew that her workbook page looked messy.

When it was time to line up for lunch, Mrs. Humphrey announced, "Boys and girls, I sometimes invite students to join what I call my 'Lunch Bunch' and meet me here in the classroom after lunch instead of going out for recess. Today, I'm inviting Angela, Davy, and, uh . . ." Mrs. Humphrey paused to be sure she got the name right, then said, "*Maryellen* to join me."

Karen King rolled her eyes at Maryellen. Mrs. Humphrey had made her announcement in a cheery tone of voice, as if joining the Lunch Bunch was a privilege. But everyone knew perfectly well that it wasn't.

"It isn't much of a 'bunch' anyway," Karen Stohlman said while the girls ate their sandwiches in the cafeteria. "It's just you, that new Italian girl who doesn't speak any English, and Davy, who needs help with multiplication."

"Gosh, Ellie," said Karen King. "Do you think Mrs. Humphrey is punishing you because of that cartoon?"

"No," sighed Maryellen. "I think I'm in the Lunch Bunch because Mrs. Humphrey doesn't like my script handwriting."

Maryellen's Lunch Bunch hunch turned out to be right.

When she went back to the classroom, Davy didn't even look up from his math book.

Mrs. Humphrey said, "Now, Care—uh, Maryellen, let's talk about your handwriting. I see that you're not really writing in cursive. You're just running your printed letters together. Is that what your teacher showed you how to do in third grade?"

"No," admitted Maryellen. "I kind of invented my handwriting all by myself."

"I see," said Mrs. Humphrey. "Well, you are in the

fourth grade now, and I think that your script should look like everyone else's. With practice, I am sure that your script can look like those beautiful letters on the placards there, above the blackboard. Will you try?"

"Yes," promised Maryellen earnestly.

"Good!" said Mrs. Humphrey. "I've thought of a way that you can practice your handwriting and help Angela learn English at the same time." Mrs. Humphrey handed Maryellen a composition book. "Now, we both know that you are quite good at simple line drawings, like *cartoons*, don't we?" said Mrs. Humphrey.

Maryellen looked up sharply. Was Mrs. Humphrey still mad about the napkin cartoon?

But Mrs. Humphrey had a twinkle in her eye. "So, I was thinking that you could draw objects and write their names in English for Angela. Use your best handwriting, because you will be making a dictionary for Angela. You can begin with objects in the classroom."

"Yes, ma'am!" said Maryellen, feeling hopeful that she was forgiven. Mrs. Humphrey's plan sounded sort of fun. Well, except for the handwriting part.

For the rest of the week, the Lunch Bunch met every day after lunch in the classroom. Davy did not speak to Maryellen, and she did not speak to him. It made her sad, because by now, she had fully admitted to herself

that Davy was right; she had gotten herself into trouble by drawing the cartoon. She also admitted to herself that she had gotten mad at Davy because she resented how he seemed to prefer being with Wayne. But even when he wasn't working on his multiplication tables with Mrs. Humphrey, Davy ignored her.

It was fun to work with Angela, though. The two girls went around the classroom, and Angela would point to an object, such as a window.

"Window," Maryellen would say in English.

"Window," Angela would repeat. Then Maryellen would sketch the window in the composition book and label it in painstaking cursive, and Angela would read the name aloud.

Pretty soon, Angela began to teach Maryellen the names of the objects in Italian. Maryellen loved the Italian words because they sounded so pretty, and they were fun to pronounce because they were tickly and delicious in her mouth. Window was *finestra*, desk was *banco*, and book was *libro*. She felt almost as if she were singing when she pronounced the Italian words that Angela taught her.

Mrs. Humphrey let Maryellen and Angela pull down the maps, and they taught each other the names of the seven continents, which were easy, and then the names

of the big countries like India and China, and then the names of the tricky little countries that made up Europe. Maryellen could never stump Angela at any of the European countries. Even when she just sketched their outlines in the composition book, Angela could name them quick as a wink in both English and Italian.

When the girls ran out of objects in the classroom to name, Maryellen drew a person waving and saying hi. Then she waved to Angela and said, "Hi!"

"Hi!" repeated Angela. "In Italian, *ciao*."

"*Chow*," repeated Maryellen. "Thanks!"

"In Italian, *grazie*," said Angela. She pointed to herself

and then to Maryellen and said, "In Italian, *amiche*. In English, I think, *friends*?"

"Oh, yes," said Maryellen. "Friends."

"Good!" said Angela, smiling her sunshiny smile.

After that, Maryellen taught Angela how to count to one hundred in English and Angela taught her how to count to *cento* in Italian. It was all unexpectedly fun. The only slightly worrisome thing was that her handwriting was not really improving. Angela never complained, but Maryellen could see that Angela had a hard time reading her cursive unless she went back to her old looped-and-linked style.

One day at lunchtime, Angela gave Maryellen a gift. It was a pretty plastic headband.

"Thanks, Angela!" said Maryellen. "It's pretty."

"Come," said Angela. She led Maryellen to the mirror by the classroom sink, and showed her how to use the headband to push her bangs back from her forehead and sort of hide them under the headband.

"Oh!" said Maryellen, delighted. "*Grazie*, Angela! *Grazie* very much!" Impulsively, she gave Angela a hug. "You're the first person who has actually come up with a helpful solution to the problem of my bangs!"

Angela smiled and hugged Maryellen back.

Another day Karen King was absent and Karen

Stohlman had ballet, so Maryellen walked her bike home with Angela, who lived near the school.

"Come in?" Angela asked.

Maryellen felt a little bit shy at first, but the minute they walked in the door, Angela's dog trotted up to welcome them and wagged his tail hello.

"Oh!" Maryellen exclaimed, kneeling to pet the dog. "What's his name?"

"Amerigo," said Angela.

"Oh, he's so cute!" said Maryellen. "My dog is named Scooter. Hi, Amerigo! I mean, *ciao*."

Angela's mother and father were at work, but her grandmother, whom Angela introduced as "Nonna," was in the kitchen making meatballs. Maryellen had never seen anyone making meatballs before. At her house, spaghetti and meatballs came straight out of the Chef Boy-Ar-Dee can. After the girls washed their hands, Nonna let them make meatballs, too.

"This is fun," said Maryellen, rolling the meat in her palms.

Nonna let Angela give a meatball to Amerigo, and he leapt up into the air to take it from her hand. Maryellen clapped and cheered. "I'd love to teach Scooter to do that," she said.

Maryellen was sorry when it was time to go. As she was leaving, Nonna said something to her in rapid Italian. Angela laughed and translated it. "Nonna says, next time, stay for dinner, have meatballs. But no jumping for meatballs like Amerigo!"

"*Grazie*, Nonna!" said Maryellen. She grinned and hopped a little hop, to show Nonna that she understood.

* * *

At the end of that week, on Friday, Maryellen wore her poodle skirt to school again. Her bangs weren't bothering her anymore, thanks to the headband from Angela, and she did love the skirt, even if she was not the one-and-only girl who had one. Later that day, as she and the Karens were leaving school to walk home, Karen Stohlman said, "Next time you're going to wear your poodle skirt, call me first and I'll wear mine, too, so we can be twins."

Maryellen winced an invisible wince, but she said, "We can call Patty, too, and be the McDoogal Sisters on the playground again."

"Except you're never *on* the playground anymore," said Karen King. "Not after lunch, anyway. How long are you going to be in that Lunch Bunch? All year?"

"I don't know," said Maryellen. "I don't mind it, really. It's sort of fun. Like today, Angela pointed to my skirt and taught me to say *barboncino francese*, which is 'French

poodle' in Italian. Don't you love that? Angela loves dogs. She has one—not a poodle, but a spaniel, named Amerigo—and he's adorable! Angela says—"

"Wait," Karen Stohlman interrupted sharply. "You've met Angela's dog?"

"Yes," said Maryellen, "when I went to her house."

"You went to Angela's house?" asked Karen King.

"Yes," said Maryellen, "but what I'm trying to say is that Angela told me that in Italian, dogs go *arf arf* instead of *woof woof* like they do in English. Isn't that funny?"

"Angela this and Angela that," said Karen Stohlman. Her voice sounded a little brittle. "You've met her dog and you've been to her house. You're getting awfully chummy with her."

"She's nice," said Maryellen. "You'd like her, too, if you got to know her."

The two Karens exchanged a look.

"I don't think so," said Karen King.

"What do you mean?" asked Maryellen.

"She's so different," said Karen Stohlman. "She has those long braids, and *pierced ears*. She stands out like a sore thumb."

"I think the ways she's different make her interesting," said Maryellen. "And what's wrong with standing out, anyway?"

Maryellen's Cold War

Chapt 9

ell," said Karen King, as if she were stating the obvious, "no one wants to stand out for a weird reason."

"Right," said Karen Stohlman. "I mean, do you like standing out and being different because of your polio?" Maryellen was speechless. It had never occurred to her before that her friends thought her polio made her *weird*. When she recovered from her shock and hurt, she said curtly, "I *did* want to stand out by being the only girl who had a poodle skirt, but you copied me."

Now Karen Stohlman was surprised. "I thought you would like it if we matched!" she exclaimed. "I didn't realize you were so set on being 'different' and 'interesting.' No wonder you like Angela so much; she's different all right. For Pete's sake, she's *Italian*."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Maryellen. "So what?"

"So, Italy was friends with Germany and Japan during the war," said Karen King. "The Italians were our *enemies*."

"But that was nearly ten years ago!" said Maryellen. "Remember how Mrs. Humphrey said that we're not enemies anymore? And anyway, Angela is just Angela. She's not responsible for Italy during the war. She wasn't even born yet."

"Fine," said Karen Stohlman with a shrug. "Go ahead and be disloyal if that's what you want to do."

"Disloyal?" said Maryellen.

"Yes," said Karen Stohlman tartly. "You seem to have forgotten, Ellie, but Italians killed my uncle during the war. I could never be friends with an Italian."

"But—" Maryellen sputtered.

Karen Stohlman talked over her. "And I could never be friends with anyone who was *friends* with an Italian."

"Me neither," said Karen King.

Maryellen felt as if she had been walloped in the stomach. Her two best friends—the only old friends she had *left* now without Davy—seemed to be saying that they would not be friends with her anymore if she was friends with Angela. For a moment, she felt flummoxed, unsure what to do. Then an unexpected feeling surprised her, a spurt of red-hot anger. *How dare they tell me how to act?*

"Well," Maryellen said quietly. "I can't be friends with anyone who couldn't be friends with someone who was friends with an Italian."

"Then I guess—I guess that means we can't be friends anymore?" squeaked Karen Stohlman.

"Yeah, I guess it does," said Maryellen.

"Come on, Karen," said Karen Stohlman. "Let's go."

Maryellen watched the two Karens walk away. She felt very lonely standing there on the sidewalk all by herself.

Then Karen Stohlman turned around and called, "And *I* don't have any Italian *bar-bon-chee-noh fran-cheh-seh* on *my* skirt. I have a regular American French poodle!"

The two Karens ran away, so Maryellen wasn't sure whether Karen Stohlman heard her shout, "You wouldn't have any poodle *at all* if you weren't a copycat!"

* * *

Make new friends
But kee-eep thee-ee old;
One is silver
And the other's gold.

It was Wednesday, two weeks later, and Maryellen's Girl Scout troop was meeting in the cafeteria after school for the first time.

Maryellen sighed. She thought about how she and the two Karens had really looked forward to being Girl Scouts together, and how just before school began, they'd talked about earning badges, selling cookies, and going

on overnight camping trips. Now, as they sang "Make New Friends," Maryellen couldn't even look the two Karens in the eye. The three of them sure had not "kept the old," friendship-wise. The Karens obviously didn't think that *she* was gold.

When Mrs. Nichols, their troop leader, told the girls to choose groups of four to share tents on their first overnight campout, which was to take place in October, the two Karens rushed to invite Patty Zender and Carol Turner to share the tent with them. That meant that Maryellen would have to be in the leftovers tent with Mrs. Nichols and her daughter Debbie, who wasn't even *in* the troop because she was too young.

Maryellen sighed again as she watched the Karens, Patty, and Carol giggling over the Kaper Chart. They had all signed up for KP, which was kitchen patrol and the most fun job on the Kaper Chart because you were in charge of finding sticks for roasting hot dogs and for toasting marshmallows for s'mores. Later, during the meeting, Maryellen saw that the Karens had used matching material to make their sit-upons. *And I just know they'll sit upon their sit-upons far away from* ***me,*** she thought.

It had been this way for two weeks now, ever since the conversation about Angela.

"It's as if the three of us are having our own little

private Cold War," Maryellen said to Carolyn that night as they got ready for bed. "We don't fight. They just snub Angela and me, and they try to get other kids to ignore us, too. Of course, Davy *already* acts as if I don't exist."

"It's like you're blacklisted," said Carolyn, stepping over Scooter, who was in the way as usual. "We learned about blacklisting in social studies. It means that you're excluded because people don't like something you did or something you believe."

"Exactly!" said Maryellen. "The Karens don't talk to Angela and me on the playground before school. They won't sit at a lunch table with Angela and me or walk home after school with us. It's like the Karens and I are on different sides of the Iron Curtain—as if we're enemies, when we used to be friends and allies."

"But do you *want* to be friends with them after what they said about Angela?" asked Carolyn.

"Oh, I don't know," said Maryellen. "They hurt my feelings, and I think they're completely wrong about Angela. The Karens would like her if they got to know her. Still," she admitted, "I miss Karen and Karen, just like I miss Davy. And remember what Joan said about how it's what you do *after* a mistake that matters? The Karens are making a mistake about Angela, but if they stopped their mistake, I'd be glad to be friends again."

"The Karens *have* been your friends for a long time," Carolyn agreed. "But you're doing the right thing, sticking up for Angela, even though it's hard. I know that's probably cold comfort."

"Well," sighed Maryellen, "maybe cold comfort is all you get in a Cold War."

The One and Only Maryellen

Chapt 10

ourth-graders!" said Mrs. Humphrey in her most listen-because-this-is-important voice. "Today is the day for our Geography Bee."

"Hurray!" the class cheered.

"Count off by twos," said Mrs. Humphrey. "Then all of you on Team One stand by the windows, and all of you on Team Two stand by the door."

In a jiffy, the class was divided into two teams. Maryellen was glad to see that Angela was on her team, Team Two. She was not as pleased to see that both Karens were also on Team Two, as was Davy.

Everyone was fizzy with excitement. Mrs. Humphrey clapped her hands. "I'd like your full attention, please," she said. "I will ask each one of you a geography question, and you must answer with the name of a country. If you answer incorrectly, you must take your seat. The team with the last person standing wins the Geography Bee."

"Can we help each other?" asked Patty Zender.

"Yes," said Mrs. Humphrey. "Even after you're sitting down, you can help a teammate. You may not tell your

teammate the answer to any question, but you may act out a clue silently, as if you are playing the game charades. All right, let's begin," said Mrs. Humphrey. "Ready?"

"Yes!" cheered the class.

Maryellen's heart rose when she saw that her teacher had made maps just like the ones that she had made for Angela. Mrs. Humphrey had drawn the outlines of different countries but had not labeled them. Both Team One and Team Two had no trouble naming the continents like Africa and Australia. They did well naming the really big countries. But when Mrs. Humphrey started to ask for the names of the smaller countries in Europe and South America, both Ones and Twos started dropping like flies. Pretty soon, there were three students left on Team One: Joan Martin, Carol Turner, and Jimmy Lansing. The only Team Twos left were Karen Stohlman, Angela, and Maryellen. Then Maryellen said Argentina by mistake when she should have said Chile, so she had to sit down. Joan Martin missed Chile, too, but Angela got it. Jimmy Lansing missed on Bolivia, and so did Angela, but Carol Turner got it.

"All right, girls," said Mrs. Humphrey to Carol and Karen Stohlman. "It is down to the two of you." She held up the outline of a country. "Carol?" she asked.

"Spain?" said Carol.

"No, I'm sorry," said Mrs. Humphrey. She turned to Karen Stohlman. "Karen, if you can name this country correctly, your team, Team Two, will win the Geography Bee. If you cannot name it correctly, then you and Carol will keep going until one of you can name a country that the other one cannot name."

France, it's France! Maryellen wanted to shout out to Karen Stohlman, who was biting her lip and looking as if she wasn't sure of the correct answer. *Oh, how can I help her?* Maryellen fretted. Then she had a brilliant idea. She waved to Karen Stohlman to get her attention. Karen looked at her with an expression that was wary but desperate. Maryellen stood up and made the shape of a full skirt around herself. She made Patty Zender stand up, and pointed to the skirt of her dress. Then she pointed to the skirt of Karen's dress, too.

Karen looked befuddled.

Suddenly, Davy jumped up. He put his hands on his hips and swayed from side to side, singing silently. The class howled with laughter.

Karen looked even more at a loss than before.

Then Angela held her fists by her chin like paws and mimed barking like a dog.

"Skirts and singing and a dog?" said Karen, frowning. "Oh!" she exclaimed, rising up on her toes. "I get it! You mean our *poodle* skirts."

Angela nodded vigorously. Davy pretended to collapse in relief. Maryellen put one hand in front of the other, making the sign from charades that meant *the word that goes* ***before.***

"Oh!" Karen exclaimed again. "They're French poodles. So—" She turned to Mrs. Humphrey. "That country must be France!"

"Yes!" said Mrs. Humphrey. "Team Two wins the Geography Bee. Congratulations!"

"HURRAY!" shouted the students on Team Two, jumping out of their seats. Karen Stohlman ran over and hugged Maryellen, who was already hugging Angela. The three of them bounced up and down with excitement, their arms all tangled up together.

Maryellen turned to say thank you to Davy, but Wayne was raising one of Davy's hands in the air, as if he had won a prizefight.

"I had no idea what Ellie and Davy were doing," said Karen Stohlman to Angela. "I never would have gotten France if it weren't for *your* clue. Thank you so much!"

"You mean *grazie*. That's how you say 'thank you' in Italian," Maryellen told Karen.

Karen hesitated, and then she grinned. "*Grazie*, Angela," she said. "And *grazie*, Ellie, too. Have you two been secretly studying geography?"

"No, but during Lunch Bunch we sometimes drew countries and wrote their names so that Angela could learn English and I could practice my handwriting," Maryellen explained.

"Well, you two seem to know the whole world!" said Karen King.

"Except for Chile and Bolivia," Angela said softly, and everyone laughed.

Then Karen Stohlman asked Maryellen and Angela shyly, "Want to sit together at lunch?"

"Okay," said Angela.

"Sure!" said Maryellen. Her heart flooded with forgiveness for the Karens. They hadn't come right out and said that they were sorry, but they were showing that they wanted to be her friend again—and Angela's friend, too.

"Angela, you've certainly learned a lot of English," said Karen King.

"Ellie taught me," said Angela. "She made it fun."

Maryellen grinned at Angela. Then she sighed and said, "I just wish my handwriting had improved as much as Angela's English. Mrs. Humphrey probably wishes that, too. I mean, that's the whole reason I was in the Lunch Bunch."

* * *

Maryellen and Angela arrived early for Lunch Bunch that day. Neither Davy nor Mrs. Humphrey was there yet.

The girls decided to work on sentences.

"If something happened in the past, you use *was*," said Maryellen. "Like, 'The Geography Bee *was* fun.' But if the thing is happening now, you use *is*. Like, 'Angela *is* smart.' Now you try."

"Okay," said Angela. "How about: 'Davy is your friend.'"

Maryellen smiled sadly, and gently corrected Angela. "Davy *was* my friend," she said.

Angela shook her head firmly. "No," she said. "He *is*."

"Well," Maryellen sighed. "Let's just say that I hope that maybe someday, he *will be* my friend again. *Will be* is what you say when you're talking about the future, and the things you hope for."

When Mrs. Humphrey and Davy arrived, Mrs. Humphrey told Davy and Angela that they could go to recess, and then she called Maryellen to her desk.

"Maryellen," Mrs. Humphrey said, without any Care, Jo, no, or ohs!, as if she knew *exactly* who Maryellen was without any doubt now. "You and Angela have had a good time helping each other, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes!" said Maryellen. "We're good friends."

"Splendid," said Mrs. Humphrey. She hesitated, and then she went on, "It was kind of you to befriend Angela, and it was brave, too. I saw how your old friends

disapproved. It's not easy to take a stand when you have to stand apart."

Maryellen nodded, pleased that her teacher had noticed what was going on. "I think we're all friends now, though."

"Good," said Mrs. Humphrey. She began leafing through the composition book with Maryellen's sketches and labels in it. "I know that you have been trying for quite some time to change your handwriting, and I appreciate your effort. But I think that loopy style you invented for yourself actually looks better than your attempts at normal cursive. Just keep doing what you're doing. You've got your own way of doing things, so I guess it makes sense that your handwriting is unique, too." She handed the book back to Maryellen with a smile.

"Thanks!" said Maryellen, hugging the book to her chest. *That's me,* she thought, *I'm the one-and-only Maryellen Larkin, and there's no one else quite like me in the whole wide world.*

A Sneak Peek at

Taking Off

If Maryellen's going to become famous, invent a flying machine, and get her sister's wedding off the ground, she'll need all the help she can get!

To celebrate the last day of school, Mom had cut up a chilled watermelon and set up the sprinkler in the front yard. Within minutes of getting home from school, Maryellen and Beverly were in their bathing suits running through the deliciously cold sprinkler water. Tom and Mikey danced from foot to foot just at the edge of the spray, and whenever the cold water rained down on them gently, they squealed with delight. Scooter, lying with his head on his paws, watched from the shade.

Suddenly Beverly said, with wide eyes, "Look!"

Dad was turning in to their driveway, and attached to his car was a huge silver trailer. Dad honked the car horn, and Mom, Joan, and Carolyn came dashing out of the house. As Dad got out of the car, Tom and Mikey ran to greet him.

"What on earth is *that*?" asked Mom when everyone had settled down a bit.

"Isn't it a beauty?" said Dad, patting the trailer with pride. "It's the 1955 Airstream. And it's all ours. We are going to see the U.S.A. this summer, kids, and this will be our home away from home."

"Hurray!" cheered everyone but Mom.

"We're taking a family road trip," said Dad. "It'll be a chance for some real togetherness. I thought we'd head

out west, to Yellowstone National Park."

"I love the idea of heading west!" Maryellen gushed. "Just about all my favorite TV shows are Westerns!" Maryellen pictured herself riding a galloping horse across the sagebrush prairie, sleeping out under the stars, and crossing raging rivers like the pioneers. "Please can we go to the Alamo, Dad?" she begged. "Davy Crockett was there." Maryellen and the little kids sang the song from the TV show:

Davy, Davy Crockett!
King of the wild frontier!

"Davy Crockett?" sniffed Joan. "I can't believe you idolize a guy who walked around with a dead raccoon on his head. I think all those Westerns you love so much are ridiculous."

"They are not," Maryellen protested. "You—"

But Mom held up both hands to stop them. She looked harried. "I've got Joan and Jerry's wedding breathing down my neck," she said to Dad. "There's still so much to do. The painters are coming next week to get the house ready for the wedding. Who'll supervise them—Scooter?"

"Scooter will come with us," said Dad. "And don't you think you'd like a vacation from all the wedding worries?"

"I'm not sure that it *will* be a vacation for *me*," said Mom. "Staying in a trailer in a campground just means that I'll be doing all my usual work of cooking and laundering and cleaning under tougher-than-usual conditions."

Everyone was quiet, thinking about what Mom had said. Maryellen could see that Mom had several valid points.

"Mom," said Maryellen, "what if Grandmom and Grandpop came here? That way, we could see them, and they could take care of the house while we're gone and be sure the painters are doing everything right. They could stay for a while after our trip, too, so that we could have a nice long visit together."

Mom considered her suggestion. "That might work," she said, nodding and smiling a little.

"That's a great idea, Ellie," said Dad, beaming.

Maryellen turned eagerly to Mom. "And I'll take care of Scooter on the trip, I promise." Truthfully, she didn't think that being responsible for lazy, sleepy Scooter would be very hard. She added, "And I'll help with other chores, too."

"I'll help, too," said Carolyn. "It'll be fun to keep the Airstream neat and tidy and shipshape!"

"You needn't worry about cooking much, sweetheart,"

said Dad to Mom. "We'll mostly be eating the fish I catch. I'll fry 'em up over a campfire."

"We'll have s'mores for dessert," added Maryellen. "And you can teach Joan to cook in the little Airstream kitchen, and then she can make dinner for us, too."

"All right," said Mom. She shrugged in surrender. "Westward ho, I guess."

The 1950s were years of peace, prosperity, promise, and exuberant growth in the United States. World War Two was over, and the economy was booming. Families were booming, too, and big families like Maryellen's were not unusual. In fact, so many children were born during this era that it became known as the *baby boom*. Millions of young families and retired people moved to the

During the baby boom, maternity wards were filled to bursting with new arrivals!

New homes for growing families sprang up in the suburbs. Houses could be built more quickly if they were all the same, as in Maryellen's neighborhood.

Advertisers encouraged people who couldn't move to the sunbelt to vacation there instead.

Sun Belt—southern states like Florida that had much warmer weather than the *Snow Belt* states up north.

Jobs were plentiful as industries switched from making wartime products to making goods for families to buy. Advertisers and companies encouraged Americans to "keep up with the Joneses" by having homes, cars, and appliances that were as nice as their neighbors', so that people would buy lots of new products. Homeowners like the Larkins were proud of their new appliances and modern conveniences. Neighbors would often gather to admire big new purchases such as

Advertisements for household goods boasted about their great new technology and convenience.

televisions and cars!

In Maryellen's time, television shows were in black and white, and networks broadcast only a few hours each day. Whole families would gather to watch popular comedies such as *I Love Lucy*, Westerns such as *The Lone Ranger*, and variety shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Only a few channels were available, so most people watched the same news shows, programs, and advertisements.

This gave newscasters and advertisers great power to shape the public's view of life, yet TV didn't always depict life accurately. For example, women were usually shown as homemakers even though millions of women worked outside the home. And except for a few Native Americans in Westerns, almost everyone on TV was white. Americans whose lives didn't match the television version of life sometimes felt ignored or as if they didn't belong.

Even the government encouraged *conformity,* or agreement and sameness. Although the United States was not officially at war with the Soviet Union, the two countries were deeply suspicious of each other and had an unfriendly relationship known as the *Cold War.* People who admired the Soviet Union's communist form of government were known as *Reds*. People who were suspected of being "Red," or of having friendly feelings toward the Soviet Union, could be *blacklisted,* which meant they might be fired from their jobs and questioned by the government. When this happened, sometimes their former friends shunned them, too. Maryellen feels this pressure to conform when she makes friends with Angela, the Italian girl.

Many Americans were hostile to anyone who admired communism or communist countries like the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) covered a large part of Europe. It was led by Russia and included many smaller countries.

Still, many Americans look back on the 1950s as fun and happy years full of optimism. Middle-class children like Maryellen had comfortable lives, with more opportunities for education and entertainment than any previous generation of children. Television encouraged conformity,

Some people wanted American Communists to be ***registered****, or a list kept of their names, to make it easier to blacklist them. This bumper sticker promotes that idea. Political bumper stickers first appeared in the 1950s.*

but it also broadened people's views by showing how other people lived and by bringing the whole world right into peoples' living rooms. Just like Maryellen, many Americans felt energized, inspired, and challenged to find a balance between being what people wanted or expected them to be and being unique or "one and only."

A middle-class family in the 1950s enjoying a Sunday drive in their convertible, followed by a picnic in the country

Find more stories about these American Girl characters at bookstores and at AmericanGirl.com:

a Nez Perce girl who loves daring adventures on horseback

a Jewish girl with a secret ambition to be an actress

who joins the war effort when Hawaii is attacked

whose big ideas get her into trouble—but also save the day

who finds the strength to lift her voice for those who can't

who fights for the right to play on the boys' basketball team

Published by American Girl Publishing

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 QP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by American Girl. References to real events, people, or places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of imagination.

All American Girl marks, Maryellen™, and Maryellen Larkin™ are trademarks of American Girl.

Illustrations by Blake Morrow · Vignettes by Kelley McMorris

Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from the Library of Congress

PICTURE CREDITS
The following have provided permission to reprint images:
Cover—iStock.com/NORRIE3699 (dog); Back Cover—iStock.com/MaboHH (car); iStock.com/MaboHH (house); pp. iii–iv—Found Image Holdings Inc/Corbis Historical/Getty Images (Florida postcard); pp. 106–107—William C. Shrout/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images (baby boom); Hulton Archive/Archive Photos/Getty Images (subdivision); GraphicaArtis/Archive Photos/Getty Images (Florida ad); Fotosearch/Archive Photos/Getty Images (Chevy ad); pp. 108–109—Apic/RETIRED/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (General Electric ad); GraphicaArtis/Archive Photos/Getty Images (watching TV); Ralph Crane/The LIFE Picture collection/Getty Images (picketers); pp. 110–111—Bettmann/Bettman/Getty Images (map); Stuart Lutz/Gado/Getty Images (bumper sticker); Tom Kelley Archive/Archive Photos/Getty Images (picnic)

© 2015, 2019 American Girl. All American Girl marks are trademarks of American Girl. Marcas registradas utilizadas bajo licencia. American Girl ainsi que les marques et designs y afférents appartiennent à American Girl.
MADE IN CHINA. HECHO EN CHINA. FABRIQUÉ EN CHINE.
Retain this address for future reference: American Girl, 8400 Fairway Place, Middleton, WI 53562, U.S.A. **Importado y distribuido por** A.G. México Retail, S. de R.L. de C.V., Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra No. 193 Pisos 10 y 11, Col. Granada, Delegación Miguel Hidalgo, C.P. 11520 Ciudad de México. Conserver ces informations pour s'y référer en cas de besoin. American Girl Canada, 8400 Fairway Place, Middleton, WI 53562, U.S.A.
Manufactured for and imported into the EU by: Mattel Europa B.V., Gondel 1, 1186 MJ Amstelveen, Nederland.

Maryellen wants to stand out…

. . . but with five brothers and sisters, it's not so easy. Giving herself a haircut doesn't go quite the way she expects—and when she draws a cartoon of her teacher on the first day of fourth grade, she draws more attention than she wants! At least her drawing skills help her make an interesting new friend. Together, they might be able to win the Geography Bee—but only if Maryellen can find a way to help her old friends get past their prejudice.

Abridged Edition

8+ $7.99 U.S.
GGB08-AB1A
MADE IN CHINA
HECHO EN CHINA
FABRIQUÉ EN CHINE

play® American Girl™
Discover online games, quizzes, activities, and more at **americangirl.com/play**

ISBN: 978-1-68337-136-6
50799
9 781683 371366